

# Stay With Me

-iswyn-



## Meet Cute

*That's him, Tony thought to himself dazedly. He's the one.*

The young man standing next to him was utter perfection. His smooth creamy skin was completely unblemished. His blue-black hair looked like a silk screen when it fell down between them, so rich and glossy that Tony could almost feel it between his fingers.

One perfect eyebrow was arched in amusement, and the left side of his mouth quirked up in what wasn't quite an apologetic smile.

"Sorry about the hair," his perfect smooth voice offered an apology as insincere as the smile. "I can never seem to make it stay up, it just slides right down."

"S'fine," Tony managed to say through a throat that felt like he'd been gargling actual salt. "S' nice hair."

The beautiful man grinned, and it was like the sun had come up in the drab windowless room. The urge to lean in and capture those smiling pink lips was almost too much to shove away.

Gods help Tony, he was definitely the one.

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It had been a surprise when Tony woke in the hospital. When they told him he was in the mental ward, that was even more surprising.

For a moment, he had wondered if Stane had decided to try to get rid of him by having him committed. That didn't make sense, though. Tony let him do whatever he wanted at Stark Industries. Why kill the goose that laid the golden eggs?

His mind turned down other dark reasons they could be holding him in a mental ward, but that couldn't be it. If they knew about him, knew what kind of creature he really was, he wouldn't have been in a nice cushy bed, not even one with restraints attached. The restraints weren't even attached to him.

It turned out to be simpler than any of that.

He'd been brought in by a worried bar owner when he'd passed out in her establishment.

He had a nasty case of alcohol poisoning, which in itself didn't warrant a 72 hour stay in a mental ward, but apparently he'd said something during his intake that had changed their minds. The doctor was vague about exactly what he'd said, like it was some kind of sick game.

"Why don't you tell me about how you feel, instead?" he had asked, adjusting his glasses.

Tony couldn't help rolling his eyes at that. "Why don't you just tell me what I said that has everyone so worried, and I can explain?"

"It's more than just something you said, Mr. Stark," the doctor huffed. "Do you know how much alcohol you had in your blood when you arrived?"

"I dunno, point two five, point three?" Tony took a wild guess based on the situation. "Must have been bad if you guys think I'm suicidal. That's it, isn't it? You think I was trying to off myself?"

The doctor was either scowling at Tony, or he had a serious case of resting bitchface. "Were you trying to kill yourself?"

Tony rolled his eyes. If only it were so simple. "Of course I wasn't trying to kill myself. And before you ask, what I was trying to do was get blotto. Obviously."

"Obviously," the doctor agreed in a tone that said he didn't agree at all. He picked a clipboard up off his desk and peered at it. "BAC point three one. Loss of consciousness, concerns of a possible seizure in the cab on the way to the hospital."

He supposed that explained the questions when he woke about what day it was, where he thought he was, and the sum of three plus four. They were afraid he'd damaged his brain. Hell, he probably had.

"So I overestimated my alcohol tolerance. It's been a while since I went out drinking." A while, he said. More than a year. *Too long, not long enough*, his brain pointed out unhelpfully. Why did he always do this to himself?

At least last time he hadn't landed himself in the hospital, let alone the mental ward.

Putting the clipboard back down, the doctor shook his head sadly. "We have all day if you like, Mr. Stark. Why don't you tell me about why you thought you needed to drink?"

"I broke up with my girlfriend, okay? Or rather, she broke up with me." It wasn't even a half-truth, but there was a kernel of reality in it. Marianne had told him that she needed to be 'free', whatever the fuck that had meant. She had assured him that she still wanted to see him. It just seemed that she wanted to see everyone else, too.

Tony had never been much for sharing.

The doctor was nodding as though he'd been given the most important information of all time. "And how did that make you feel?"

Tony stared at him so hard his eyes almost crossed. "Um, sad?"

The doctor had picked up a pen, and was scribbling something on a piece of paper. "And do you always consume alcohol to excess when you feel sad?"

"Not really. I don't drink much. Hence the whole 'didn't know my limit' thing." Tony shook his head. "Look, could you just tell me what I said that has you so freaked out?"

He didn't, of course. Said something about how it would be like telling Tony how to feel, and that he wanted Tony to make his own decisions on how to feel. As though his feelings the night before hadn't been his, but the alcohol's.

They didn't really have all day. The doctor had dozens of other patients to see to, and Tony,

apparently, had to go back to his room and think about what he'd done. That, or sit in a big bright common room with a bunch of people in bathrobes, one of whom was sitting in front of the television yelling in wordless irritation at random intervals.

Tony didn't want the big, the bright, or the reminder of mental illness. He wasn't like those people. He was in control of himself. Most of the time.

So he ended up back in his room, where he wasn't allowed to close the door for even the slightest bit of privacy, lying on a bed with no back support and reading a six month old People magazine. He was surprised he was allowed to have that. He might try to kill himself by papercut, after all.

They forced him to go out and 'be social' at dinnertime, which basically meant that they didn't want him eating in his room. He wasn't actually expected to do anything social. The food was as drab and lifeless as the company, so Tony found that he didn't have much of an appetite. He forced down enough so that no one could say he was refusing to eat.

They did an inventory of his silverware when he turned in his tray, which was deeply unsettling. Did they do that to everyone, or did they really think he was going to steal a fork and... what, stick it in a light socket? It wasn't as though he'd been issued a steak knife.

Then the nurses changed for the evening shift, and everything about the hospital changed for Tony.

When the beautiful young man knocked hesitantly on his door frame, Tony looked up from the ancient magazine that he was swiftly memorizing. His breath caught, and he couldn't even summon the mental power to speak.

"May I come in?" the man asked. "I'm supposed to take your vitals."

*Okay Tony, he told himself. You're in a mental ward. Sitting there staring at the pretty nurse is going to make him think you're like the yelling guy in the common room.* "Um, yeah. Sure. Of course."

*Losing control of your mouth isn't going to make it better. Say something smart or funny!*

The nurse just smiled and stepped over to the side of the bed, and that was when his hair slipped out of the messy bun he'd had it in.

"Aren't the nurses in this place supposed to be all stern and demanding?" Tony asked, finally forcing his brain and mouth to connect. "You didn't even glare at me or anything."

The nurse, whose name tag read 'Loki', laughed, and it was beautiful.

Loki. Like the ancient Norse trickster god. Tony saw a parallel between the name and the attitude, but he didn't want to say anything like that. With that name, he probably heard about Norse gods all the time.

"So aren't you gonna grab my arm and twist it around till you can find a pulse, or something?" Of course, given such witty material as that, maybe he should have gone with the trickster god thing.

"If you like," Loki smiled at him. "I usually check pulse and blood pressure without the S&M, though."

Tony grinned. "Oooh, so what gets me the S&M treatment?"

"Get handsy enough and find out, Mr. Stark," came a practiced sounding reply.

"Nah," Tony shook his head and stuck his arm out for Loki's convenience. "I don't get handsy unless the invitation is real. And it's Tony. There is no Mr. Stark, my Dad's dead."

Loki blinked up at him for a moment, and he wondered if that had been a bridge too far. "I suppose that's one way around telling everyone that cliché about how 'Mr. Stark is your father'. Doctor Mendez wasn't kidding about you being... unusual."

"Do tell!" Tony leaned in a fraction; enough to show interest in the subject, but not so close as to encroach on personal space. "I'd love to hear the doc's take on me."

The gorgeous nurse quirked that eyebrow again, and pinned him in a vivid green gaze for a long moment, then shrugged. "He says you have a wall up. You like to pretend you don't have feelings, and you make everything into a joke."

Tony frowned. "I have feelings," he insisted defensively. "I wouldn't be here if I didn't, would I?"

"Ah, of course. Drank yourself into a stupor over a girl," Loki nodded. Unless Tony missed his mark, there was disappointment in that voice.

"It wasn't really her, you know," he confided. "It's just that everyone always leaves me. Boyfriends and girlfriends are just the tip of the pathetic iceberg."

That was surreal. Sure, he was trying to hit on the nurse, but telling the truth about his feelings? He didn't do that with anyone. At least he'd made sure to mark himself bisexual.

"Everyone?" Loki asked, his head cocked to one side.

"What, you want a list? Friends, parents, mentors, boyfriends, girlfriends... I could give you a whole itemized thing, and what excuse everyone gave when they didn't want to be around me anymore." He snapped his teeth closed and lay back in the bed.

Fuck. That was way too much truth.

"Sorry," he apologized. "You don't need me to bother you with my issues."

"I am a nurse in a mental ward, you know." Loki was smiling at him again, but the amusement was gone. It wasn't the all-too-familiar pity, either. "Your issues are my job. And frankly, your issues aren't too scary, comparatively speaking."

Tony couldn't help it, he laughed. If Loki noticed that the laugh bordered on hysteria, he didn't show it.

"Oh, come on," the gorgeous nurse protested. "You've been out there. We have patients with schizophrenia, borderline personality disorder, depression so deep it's made them suicidal—pretty much everyone here is worse off than you. Maybe even me."

And then he winked. He damn well winked at Tony.

He was that beautiful, and clever and funny too? No. It was too soon. Tony had just been in love. Marianne was supposed to be the last time. He didn't want to fall in love again. It always ended the same way.

The nurse smiled at him and patted him on the hand as he withdrew to make marks on the chart by the bed. "It's hard, I know. No reason to go drink yourself to oblivion, though. If she left you, she wasn't worth the heartache."



"I turn thirty in a few months," Tony sighed. "And if you're right, then in almost thirty years, I've never met a single person who was worth heartache."

The smile widened into a mischievous grin, and Loki put his hand back on Tony's arm. "Now you're starting to get it, handsome."

With another wink, he turned and was gone, leaving a stunned Tony staring after.

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In his six years assigned to the mental health ward, Loki had never once flirted with a patient. Well, not until *him*.

Loki had become a nurse in the psych ward because he genuinely wanted to help people with mental illnesses. He wanted to keep fourteen year old girls from cutting their wrists. He wanted to make sad people with chronic illnesses happier.

Then there was Anthony Edward Stark.

He'd just come back from two whole days off, and immediately Doctor Mendez had come to him.

"I need your help with a patient, Loki," the doctor looked unusually frustrated, so Loki figured it must be one of *those* cases. Usually, they were the Borderline patients. Angry, manipulative, and prone to stubbornness, they were always the hardest to deal with.

"Is Sif insisting that I dyed her hair black in the middle of the night again?" he asked tiredly.

That at least elicited a chuckle. "It's just a stubborn one. You're good at those. I always come off..."

"Like a doctor?"

"Yes," the doctor sighed. "I never imagined so many people would think of that as a bad thing. This one seems to think I'm out to get him personally, though."

"Did you pull doctor face and threaten to spend all day with him?" Loki asked, already knowing the answer.

Jaime Mendez was a brilliant man, and incredible with schizophrenic patients that other people had written off, but sometimes he missed the simple things. Like general human interaction being more important than playing the role of doctor.

Jaime sighed and didn't answer, which was answer enough. "They brought him in half dead. Alcohol poisoning. The ER guy was pretty worried about brain damage. Something about not being responsible for 'a loss like that'; apparently the guy is some kind of scientific genius."

"So he went on a bender, and they sent him to us?" Loki was unimpressed.

They'd had more than their share of patients who obviously didn't belong in the ward. The boy whose parents had decided that his teenage rebellion was antisocial behavior. The twenty-something girl who thought pretending to be suicidal could get her out of a drunk driving charge. The substance abuse patient who was obviously biding his time, waiting to get out and score more coke.

Some guy who just got drunk, though, seemed more ridiculous than average.

At least Loki had been able to help the teenage boy adjust better to puberty, and make sure the girl knew that mental health professionals couldn't be manipulated into believing that she was on the edge just because she cried prettily while thinking about going to jail. The junkie, well, he couldn't be helped until he was ready for it. Hopefully that would be before his only doctor was the coroner.

"Normally I'd agree with you, Loki. But when they admitted him for the booze, he said some pretty nasty stuff." Jaime handed him the clipboard, and he couldn't help raising an eyebrow at the notes. The doctor nodded. "Exactly. It's a little dramatic for a guy who swore to me today that he was just 'sad'. He's put up a wall and he won't let me in. You're better at these ones, Loki. Want him?"

Even before meeting the man, Loki had to refrain from looking at the file's picture of soulful brown eyes and disarrayed hair and just saying *yes, oh gods yes*.

Maybe it was time to try dating again, if he was so desperate that he was salivating over patient photos.

When he stepped into Anthony Stark's doorway, the cool-headed logical medical professional completely deserted him. He didn't see a man in pain who needed his support through what was obviously a serious depression. He saw the most beautiful man he'd seen in a very long time. The photo hadn't done those eyes justice. His hair was still sticking up in every direction, but somehow it worked for him.

And the first thing Loki did, not even thinking about it, was start flirting. Some nonsense about his goddamned hair. By the time he left the room, he realized he hadn't asked any relevant questions. He'd heard the word 'boyfriends', obviously intentionally showing that Mr—err, Tony—was open to relationships with men, and his brain had short-circuited into a repeating loop of illogical logic.

He was a patient and Loki could not date him.

He had abandonment issues so big they could probably be seen from space. His depression was because he wanted a serious relationship, and his girlfriend had left him. He was beautiful, charming, and apparently a genius. He had responded instantly and instinctively when Loki had wanted some space. Nothing resolved abandonment issues, but a strong healthy relationship could help.

What Tony Stark really needed was a boyfriend, and one who wasn't going to leave him. Loki could be in a relationship like that.

He was a patient and Loki could not date him!

Loki was still mulling the situation over in his head at two am. He didn't always work the night shift, but sometimes the others liked a break from the constant nights on, and Loki wasn't a slave driver. Besides, nights were almost always the easy shift. Lots of sleeping, not much drama.

Tony would only be in the ward for another two days, unless he exhibited signs of some more serious mental illness that posed a threat to himself or others. That seemed rather unlikely, given the man's even temper and quick mind. It was possible, of course; Loki had seen it happen.

He found himself wondering if he wanted it to happen or not. He'd see more of Tony, sure, but if he turned into a long term resident, he was definitely off limits.

Wasn't he off limits anyway?

"Hey there, House, you hand out drugs to poor suckers who can't sleep?" Stark's smooth voice joked from a few yards away, and Loki looked over to see him poking his head out into the hall.

When he came the rest of the way out and leaned on the wall, Loki forgot what he was supposed to be doing.

Tony managed to make the ugly hospital scrubs they'd put him in look good. Well, half of them, anyway. He'd taken off the shirt, and was wearing just the grey pants. They hung low like something straight out of a beefcake calendar; the defined cut of his hipbones catching Loki's eyes for far too long to be professional.

When his gaze finally managed to find its way back up to Tony's eyes, there was conflict in them. He looked like Loki felt, actually. He wanted to stare at that body all night, possibly lick it a bit. He needed to keep his professionalism intact. He wanted, and knew he wasn't supposed to want.

Tony didn't need to keep professional, though. What problem could Tony have with Loki's inappropriate behavior? Well, other than the fact that it was inappropriate, of course.

Loki was suddenly aware that they had been silent for far too long.

"Do you usually have trouble sleeping, or it is just the uncomfortable hospital bed?" Loki tried to ask it conversationally, like he wasn't trying to make a diagnosis.

Tony's raised eyebrow told him that he'd failed. "Neither—strange place. Can't sleep unless I'm either soused or in my own bed."

That was understandable, and not out of the ordinary. "You have a choice. I can give you a Tylenol PM, or we can have a talk and see what happens."

"When you say 'a talk', you don't mean anything fun, I assume," Anthony smirked at him. "So wait. You can give me the hard drugs? I thought you were a nurse."

"First of all, I don't recall suggesting that 'hard drugs' were on the table. Second," Loki paused a moment. He wasn't usually bothered by his qualifications, but he had rather wanted to keep Tony thinking of him as harmless. Oh well. "I'm a PMHNP. Which, other than being annoying to say, means that I can prescribe drugs if you're actually in need of them."

Calling himself a nurse was not only easier, it was much less threatening to patients like Tony, who seemed not to want a doctor's help.

"A PMN... huh?"

"It's a fancy way of saying I'm the boss of you," Loki tried the joking route.

It seemed to work, since Anthony chuckled and didn't immediately disappear into his room again. "So what you're saying is that it's your *job* to give me the hard drugs?"



“Only if you’re a very good boy,” Loki purred, and then realized what he’d done. Again.

Tony grinned and ducked his head bashfully, his hair falling toward his eyes. “I can try to be good, Doctor Loki.”

Holy hell. Someone needed to save him from Tony Stark.

## Professional Ethics

Tony was playing with fire and he knew it.

He wasn't one of those people who got off on fire, either. As opposed to common belief, he had never been beaten or sexually abused, never tortured small animals for fun, and he certainly hadn't wet the bed as a child.

What kind of criteria was that for measuring serious mental illness, anyway?

This was stupid, though, and he knew it. Loki wasn't just a nurse as Tony had assumed, or some mindless medical drone like the others. He was a full-on mental health professional. Shouldn't he have some kind of sixth sense that told him Tony was dangerous?

There he was, though, sitting behind the counter smirking at Tony in a way that screamed of sexual tension.

It wasn't that Tony wanted to hurt him.

Quite the contrary, actually. Tony never really wanted to hurt anyone. He just wished they would stop trying to leave him alone. Part of him wished that *he* would stop hoping for something different and just resign himself to being alone. It would be healthier for everyone.

He just kept trying, though, and it looked like Loki was the new target of his affections. Maybe it would be different. Maybe Loki wouldn't try to leave him.

He sauntered over to lean on the counter. "Okay, doc, I'll bite. What do you wanna talk about?"

"How about your girlfriend?" Loki asked, dropping his head to one side curiously.

"How about not?"

"Okay. Tell me about your mother," Loki countered.

Fuck. Dude didn't pull punches.

"So my girlfriend. She, um, she said she wanted to see other people." Tony felt the familiar tightening in his gut just thinking about it.

*It's not that I don't love you, Tony, Marianne had told him. I do love you. You haven't done anything wrong. I just need to be free to love whoever I want.*

"Ouch," Loki blanched. "That sounds like it hurt."

"Yeah, well she seemed to think that it was unreasonable of me to expect fidelity." Tony really hated talking about things, ever. Talking about Marianne so soon seemed even more wrong than talking in general.

Did it make her less Tony's? No. Nothing could do that anymore.

"But she isn't the only one," Loki pressed lightly.

The words felt like they were pressing on his lungs, forcing him to expel the air inside. All he could do was shake his head. Everyone else was asleep. They were practically alone, but he felt so

exposed. It wasn't the lack of privacy. It was him—Loki. Logically, Tony knew that Loki wasn't talking about *them*, that he was talking about everyone that had abandoned him. It still felt like they were discussing something forbidden.

Loki made him feel exposed in a way he didn't think he'd ever felt before. And that after one and a half conversations. Common sense told him to get away. To bide his time until they had to let him go, and then get as far away from this man as fast as he could.

Actually doing it was another matter entirely.

Tony shook his head. An answer or a denial, he wasn't sure. He'd forgotten the question.

Loki seemed to know, though. "Family?"

"Dead." Tony opted to go with the shortest possible answer, in hopes of truncating the whole conversation.

Loki was not to be denied. "Friends?"

"None." Tony shook his head again, this time adamantly.

Leaning forward, Loki nodded in understanding. "Why bother, they'll just leave?"

"Can I have my hard drugs now?" His voice had a whiny note he didn't much like, but he really wanted the conversation over.

And just like that, it was.

"Sorry, we reserve the hard drugs for people who are less lovable," Loki shook his head sadly. "So as much as I'd love to drug you into oblivion the way you tried to do to yourself with alcohol, I'm afraid you're going to have to find a way to sleep in a place that isn't home."

"I could sleep at your place," Tony went straight back to the flirting.

"Not while you're sleeping here, you can't," Loki shot back, looking surprised at himself.

It seemed Tony wasn't the only one uncertain about the strange connection between them.

"I'll be done sleeping here in a few days, right?" Tony was pretty sure they couldn't just keep him forever without cause. His knowledge of law as it related to... oh screw that, Tony didn't know anything about law. He was a lapsed scientist and failed CEO. Nothing like a lawyer.

Loki leaned forward some more and looked him square in the eye. "Do you really believe that everyone would be better off if you died?"

"Fuck my life, is that what I said?" Well that just fucking figured. It was something he would say. At least he hadn't said everyone would be safer if he died. That would be closer to the mark. Apparently even with alcohol poisoning, Tony had a modicum of common sense.

"It's one of the things you said that landed you here. Are you surprised you said it?" Loki's expression told Tony that he would know if the answer was a lie. Given the way their conversations had gone so far, it wouldn't have been a shock.

Tony just shook his head.

"Have you thought about killing yourself?" Loki followed up.

"You ask the wrong questions," Tony informed him, and he definitely wasn't pouting.

"Oh?"

"Shouldn't you be asking if there's any chance I'll follow through on thoughts of killing myself?" He put his arms down on the counter in front of Loki and stared at the hair on his forearms as though there was a pattern there that needed decoding.

"No," Loki said flatly, and the tone made Tony's head snap up to look at him. "If I wait for you to decide to follow through, then it's too late."

Something in the rigidity of his posture told Tony he was speaking from personal experience. He wondered if Loki would still want him to stop thinking about suicide if he knew him.

Not likely.

"I don't think I'm gonna kill myself," he said tentatively. "I'm just not happy. Lots of unhappy people don't kill themselves."

Loki nodded. "On the other hand, lots of unhappy people *do* kill themselves."

"What makes you think I'd be one of them?" Tony challenged.

Loki looked around for a moment, then stood and leaned into an open door. "Lorelei? Could you take over for a bit? I'm going to work with a patient." There was a muffled sound that was obviously assent, and Loki nodded. "Thank you. We're going to be in room 12, and I'm going to close the door, so don't worry about that."

Loki unlocked a drawer under the counter and pulled out a bottle of pills. Picking out a single one, he tucked it into the front pocket of his simple teal scrubs. Then he motioned Tony toward his room.

Tony shrugged and followed the implicit order, heading for his room.

It was truly an awful room, not even the size of his master bathroom at home, and more drab and beige than a hundred boring businessmen. Yeah, there was a reason Tony hadn't done well in the boardroom.

The only furniture in the room was the hospital bed that made his back ache just to look at, and the two chairs intended for guests. Not that Tony would have any guests. The attached bathroom was literally smaller than a closet, and had just a toilet and sink in it. Everything smelled of antiseptic.

There was literally nothing human in it.

Tony sat down on the edge of the bed, wondering if he was supposed to sit in a chair to put them on equal footing. Of course, they weren't equal, were they? He was the patient, and he didn't have a choice on whether he wanted to be there or not. In fact, if he wanted to get out in a few days, he didn't even have a choice about whether he talked to Loki for as long as the other man wanted.

It was an odd feeling, having absolutely no control over anything.

"So what do you want to talk about?" Loki asked, sitting casually in the chair closest to the bed.

"Seriously? I think it's pretty obvious that I don't want to talk about anything." Tony protested.

Loki snorted. Were mental health professionals supposed to do that to their patients? "If you didn't

want to talk, you'd have stayed in bed to begin with."

Fair enough.

"Well I guess it all starts with my Father. He never hugged me, you know." Tony rolled his eyes, trying to drive the point home.

Instead of taking the hint, Loki nodded. "It sounds like your relationship with your parents was a bit complicated."

"What?" He wasn't supposed to take it seriously. Hadn't the joke been obvious?

"You told me that everyone has left you, and your parents are deceased. Did they leave you before they died?" Loki looked genuinely curious, and Tony didn't know what to do with that.

"They left me at home to go to a party," he replied before his brain caught up with his reflexive answer. He'd never talked to anyone about his parents' death before. Not since the funeral, and all of that had been fake 'so sorry for your loss' bullshit. No one had ever asked. "But I stopped existing to Howard way before that. He wanted a picture of a son he could show people at parties, and a story he could tell. He never wanted an actual human being who lived and ate and breathed in his house."

Loki was silent as Tony processed what he'd said. Then he realized that he'd said all that out loud to another human being.

No one outside his family had ever known what an ungrateful son he was before. Howard had always reminded him of how easy he had it. There were kids in America who went hungry at night. Kids who didn't have proper clothes, much less computers and cars and free college educations. He had lived an easy life compared to almost every person on the planet.

"You don't think you lived up to the picture?" Loki finally asked.

Looking up at him in confusion, Tony cocked his head. "What?"

It was strange. Loki's face held no censure, no disgust. He looked... curious.

"Your father. You believe that you disappointed him somehow." His voice hadn't changed. It was still low and even and way too sexy to be real. And what was he talking about again? Howard? Oh, yuck.

"He told me so often enough," Tony nodded. "Like when I made the arc reactor. A great source of clean energy. I mean, it powers most of Malibu in addition to the Stark Industries buildings and factories."

Loki blinked for a moment. "...and that was disappointing to him?"

Tony flopped back on his bed and sighed. "I couldn't figure out how to make it work on a larger scale, so we couldn't sell it as a power source to replace coal."

Again, Loki snorted. "And any reasonable father would have been disappointed that his son couldn't solve a worldwide energy crisis."

Well Tony had never really thought about it that way. He'd just thought about it in the sense that his father had been disappointed in his Doctoral Proposal. He'd gotten his degree, but he'd never managed to get Howard's approval.



"He thought I could have done more," Tony protested, but there was no feeling in it.

"We could all do more, Tony," Loki pointed out. "Every single person in the world could do more. It doesn't mean there's anything wrong with not doing more."

"What about not doing anything?" Tony shot back. "Cause that's what I do these days. I lasted as CEO of Stark Industries for six months before giving the job to my father's best friend. And now I do nothing."

Loki looked genuinely confused. "You got a degree in what, physics?"

"My doctorate was in mechanical engineering. Why?" That seemed like an odd turn of subject. Was he going to suggest Tony get a job?

"Ah, I can see why you're so disappointed in yourself," Loki nodded sagely. "You spent all that time and effort preparing to become a CEO, what with a degree in engineering, and then you weren't any good at it."

Tony couldn't help but feel that he'd been tricked. It was a good point, though. He'd gone into the business world without a clue what he was doing. Obadiah had taken some personal time, so he hadn't had anyone to fall back on for advice. He'd been a lamb to slaughter.

He sighed. "I'm not much of an inventor, either, though. And the reactor doesn't count. It's not a viable energy source, and I made it fifteen years ago. I haven't done anything useful since."

Loki nodded again. "You're absolutely right. It's only powered most of Malibu for fifteen years. Doesn't count at all. But if it doesn't count, one might ask why you say you aren't doing anything. Have you given up, or are you just struggling to come up with something better?"

That was the crux of the matter, wasn't it? Tony had basically given up on inventing things for people to use. He made things for himself, like the robots in his lab, but he never even considered sharing that kind of thing. The only thing SI made anymore was weapons, and he wasn't interested in building a better bomb.

If you were going to kill a person, you should have to look them in the eye when you did it. Their lives should mean something, even if you were taking them away. Maybe especially if you were taking them away.

"Not really," he finally acknowledged. "I guess I've given up."

"Let me guess, you haven't done anything with your work since you left the position of CEO?" Something about the look on Loki's face made Tony think it wasn't a guess at all.

"So? What's that mean? An Oedipus complex? Daddy issues? A secret need to be dominated?" He wasn't entirely sure he wanted that answer. It was strange, but he was sure that whatever Loki told him, it would be right. He felt so damned naked in front of this virtual stranger.

"Not much, Tony," Loki smiled at him sadly. "It just means that like everyone else, you're afraid to fail. In your case, though, failure has had pretty high stakes. And you equate it with people leaving you, which has become even more important to you than the failure."

"Wow, Doc," Tony scowled at him. "Want to fit my whole life into three sentences or something?"

"You do know I'm not a doctor, right?" Loki had an eyebrow quirked, a gesture Tony was beginning to think he made often.

Tony just shrugged. "What difference does it make? Does it mean you're not qualified to listen to me whine? Or that you don't have a say in me getting out of here?"

"Oh no, I'm fully qualified to listen to whining, not that you seem to be any good at it. Listen to my neighbor kid whine about how Daddy won't buy him a new car because he crashed the old one while drunk, and you'll learn a whole new world of whining." Loki paused and seemed to consider for a moment. "And I also have a say in you getting out of here, though you'd have to do something impressive to change my mind about that."

And Tony's mind went straight for the gutter.

He fluttered his eyelashes. "Gee, Doc, what do I have to do to get you to let me go?"

"You're laughing, but I've gotten that offer before," Loki looked vaguely annoyed.

Tony grinned. "Okay, so I have to wait till after I'm released to hit on you?"

"That would be for the best, yes," Loki agreed. "For some reason, people seem to think I'm some kind of nymphomaniac, and I'll do anything for a blowjob."

"It's the voice," Tony answered the unspoken question without even thinking first. "I'd say it screams sex, but I think purrs would be a better description. I just keep imagining what you'd sound like..." His brain finally considering those words, he froze. "Fuck, I'm sorry. That was way outta line."

Looking bemused for a long moment, Loki finally nodded. He stood and reached into his pocket, pulling out the pill he'd put there earlier. "Here," he said holding it out to Tony. "Your requested hard drugs. As far as blowjobs... I can't discuss what I might sound like during sex until you're not my patient."

With that, he swept out of the room, leaving Tony to take or leave the pill (he took it), and try to get some sleep.

Dreams came fast and vivid, and would not leave him for a long time.

\*

*I just keep imagining what you 'd sound like...*

Loki shivered as he walked under the vent outside Tony's room. The cool air it was blowing did not cause or help his problem, though. Loki had once had a Borderline patient describe in vivid and impressive detail what she'd like to do to his body, and he'd remained as cool as a cucumber. It certainly hadn't affected him as much as that one accidental admission.

He was sure that leaving Lorelei alone up front for a few more minutes wouldn't hurt anything, so he scurried off to the staff lounge for the private bathroom.

He refused to admit to himself what he was about to do until he had actually pulled his scrubs down to his knees and wrapped a hand around himself. He was already half hard from thinking about what Tony had said. About those beautiful expressive brown eyes boring into his own, talking about what his voice would sound like during sex.

Those eyes were going to be his undoing. He was already wrapped around Tony's finger. He needed to tell Jaime in the morning that he couldn't work with him.

But why? By the time he did that, Tony would have 36 hours until he was free. It was almost pointless, he told himself. It wasn't like it would change Tony's care, whether he had Loki or not. In fact, he justified, it would just feed into Tony's fear of abandonment.

However distressing the situation, it didn't seem to have bothered little Loki, who was waiting somewhat impatiently for him to get on with it. *He practically offered you a blowjob*, it reminded him. *Sure it was a joke, but there was sincerity in his eyes.*

There was always sincerity in Tony's eyes.

And the way they had darkened when he'd spoken of Loki's voice, the pupils expanding to fill them up, it had been almost obscene. That intense look that told Loki he was picturing it.

Picturing what, he wondered, as he started to stroke himself in earnest.

Himself on his knees, plush pink lips wrapped around Loki's cock, while Loki moaned obscenities to please him? Would he moan in response when he enjoyed what Loki was telling him? Speed his pace when Loki told him about how he was going to push him down on his bed, on his hands and knees, and press into him, inch by excruciatingly slow inch?

Loki's hand sped, picture in his own head changing from one second to the next. Tony on his knees, Loki's cock stuffed down his throat, brown eyes glazed with lust and staring up at him. Tony on his hands and knees, pushing back as Loki filled him, begging for more. Tony on top of him, looking into his eyes as he slowly pressed his cock into...

He tried to bite his lip, to keep himself quiet, but he was sure that anyone in the adjacent lounge had heard his exclamation.

Tony.

Hands shaking, he could hardly look at himself in the mirror as he cleaned himself up and righted his scrubs. Pushing the sink handle to the hottest setting, he tried in vain to scrub himself clean.

Thankfully, there was no one in the lounge when he left the bathroom. It would have been unusual at three in the morning, but not unheard of, and certainly just his luck.

By the time he got back to the ward, Anthony was asleep. He knew this because as he passed by his room, he heard a noise. It wasn't a whimper exactly, and Loki wasn't one to sneak into a patient's room to spy on what they were up to in the middle of the night, but it didn't sound like a happy noise. So he went to check. Technically, it was part of his job, if he thought something might be off with one of the patients.

Anthony was curled up in a tight ball, arms wrapped around the pillow as though it was trying to escape. "Please," he murmured in his sleep. "Please don't." Then he buried his face in the pillow and sobbed.

Just sad, Loki's ass.

Maybe Loki could talk him into accepting a prescription for an antidepressant. It felt like a pervasive issue, not at all a minor depression over a breakup. When he met with Jaime in the afternoon, he would discuss it with him.

Lorelei was buffing her nails when he got back to the front, and it made him grin. “You love the night shift, don’t you?”

She snorted. “Damn right. How’s mister brown-eyed hottie? I hear he’s rich.”

“I have no idea how much money he has,” he rolled his eyes at his old friend turned coworker, “and you couldn’t care less. So what do you actually want?”

She looked up from her already perfect nails and assessed him for a moment. He could only imagine what she saw: flushed cheeks, disarrayed hair, and a guilty expression. “Just wondering if you’re gonna keep pretending to be Captain Cool, or admit that you wanna bang him like a screen door in a hurricane.”

He felt his cheeks heat even more. “You’ve never even been in a hurricane, Lorelei.”

She laughed as he went and hid in the office.

When the day crew arrived, Loki went home and slept like the dead. He did not dream of big sad brown eyes and full pink lips wrapped around his name. He wasn’t sure whether he was dreading work that night, or looking forward to it.

Only when he arrived, it didn’t go like he’d planned. He and Doctor Mendez went through their usual pleasantries and then the discussion of their regular patients—no major changes, thank goodness—but when they came to Anthony, it was different.

Jaime frowned as they arrived at the folder marked ‘Stark’. “Did you try talking to him last night?” he asked, his voice soft and concerned.

“Yes,” Loki nodded. “We actually had an excellent talk. He opened up. It was much better than I expected.”

Jaime’s face fell. “Maybe it’s just me, then. He seemed even more withdrawn today. Said he wasn’t feeling well.”

Loki considered for a moment before responding. “That may be my fault, actually. He couldn’t sleep so I gave him an Ambien. There was nothing about allergies in his file, but maybe it didn’t agree with him.” It had obviously gotten him to sleep, but both of them were all too aware that the sleep given by drugs wasn’t always the most restful.

Jaime nodded. “Maybe that is it. He’s been listless and fidgety all day. Kept twisting his hands into knots while he talked to me.”

“Well then, no pills tonight.” Loki made a note on his clipboard, as though there were any chance he’d forget.

“But you said he opened up?”

“Mhm,” Loki agreed, finishing his note. Without going into too much detail, and definitely leaving out everything involving discussion of blowjobs or sex noises, Loki gave him a summation of his discovery: there were abandonment issues stemming from his parents, and, Loki believed, an underlying depression.

"Do you think you can talk him into treatment?" Jaime asked when he was done.

"Antidepressants maybe," Loki mused. "Probably not therapy, unless it's very short term."

Jaime nodded. "Well it's more than I'll be able to get out of him. Work on the therapy angle, though. I think having someone to talk to could go a long way for this one."

The doctor put his file folders away for the day and headed for the door. As he exchanged his lab coat for his jacket, he chuckled. "It's really too bad you're not in private practice, Loki. I'd have someone reliable to recommend on the outside."

Loki laughed at him. "Even I need to sleep on occasion, Jaime."

It was good to work with a doctor who appreciated him. His first job out of school when he was an RN, they had treated the nurses like indentured servants whose opinions were patronizably adorable. Places like that ended up having a pecking order where the patient came in last, and got the worst treatment.

Jaime treated him like an equal, which had been a revelation when he'd arrived. He'd decided almost immediately that he wouldn't be leaving.

When Loki went out in the main room to look over the patients eating dinner, he could see Jamie's concerns in Tony. He looked pale, and there were dark circles under his eyes. He'd hardly eaten anything, and seemed to be forcing down what little he was eating. He gave up after a while and dropped his fork onto the tray, the hand that had held it fluttering uselessly in the air for a moment before settling on his neck. His eyes met Loki's for an instant, then fell back to his tray, his hand rubbing even harder at his neck.

Yes, Tony would have to find sleep for himself that night. Whatever the Ambien had done to him, Loki didn't want to see it happen again. Fortunately, as bedtime approached, Tony didn't express any interest in sleep aids. In fact, he looked up from a book as a few other patients were being given their evening doses, shuddered, and quickly looked away again.

Loki tried not to consider what it said about him that he waited till after lights out to go talk to Tony.

When they had finished the nightly routine of getting everyone to bed, Lorelei had just given him a sly look and waved him off. "Go chat with prince charming. He's probably the least crazy person here, including you and me."

"Lorelei, you know we don't—"

"Yeah, yeah, crazy's a bad word," Lorelei rolled her eyes at him, but coming from her, the gesture was affectionate. "Go get some tail, boss."

"I'm not going to do that," he protested as he followed her suggestion.

She just laughed after him.

"The lady at the front desk likes you," Tony observed almost the second Loki walked in. "Are you guys, um... you know?"

Loki almost choked on his own tongue at that thought. "Um, no. She's my best friend's sister."

"Guess he'd kick your ass, huh?" Tony smiled ruefully.



Loki shook his head. He scanned the room fully, eyes settling on the chair he'd used the night before, and then back to Tony's form, huddled in the bed. He looked so small and vulnerable lying there like that. Making a decision, he went to the end of Tony's bed and sat there.

"No," he said softly. "She killed herself when we were children. So I look out for Lorelei for her."

"Oh." Tony's eyes widened at the explanation. "I'm sorry."

"So was I." Loki answered in the only way he could. It had been fourteen years, and some days he still wasn't ready to talk about it. "I heard you had a hard day."

Tony shuddered and nodded, but didn't elucidate.

"Tell me about it." Loki had the distinct feeling that if he gave the impression of asking, he'd get shut down before he even started.

"Do I have to?" Tony asked in a small voice.

"Technically, you don't have to do anything," Loki answered by rote.

Tony scowled at that. "And technically you could suggest having me committed indefinitely."

Loki grinned in answer. "While I confess that I'd love to see your smiling face on a regular basis, it has occurred to me that there are much better ways to do that than forcing you to stay here."

He hadn't planned to be so up front about it. Tony Stark just seemed to bring out the recklessness in Loki. It was a major personality trait that he'd tried to stamp down over the years. He did enjoy it a little, though. Part of him was still appalled at his own behavior. Most of him just wanted to see Tony Stark smile again.

Tony looked more conflicted than happy, though. Did he not want to see Loki? He'd been so certain after last night...

"Would you really?" His smooth baritone voice was colored with suspicion.

Ah, of course. Abandonment issues, Loki reminded himself. Well he knew how to deal with that.

He pulled his cell phone out of his pocket, unlocked it, and tossed it to Tony. "I guess the question is would *you* really?"

"You know I have an eidetic memory, right?" Tony asked cautiously.

"What are you going to do," Loki chuckled. "Memorize my father's phone number while you're in there? Give him a call, he'd probably like you. He's a chemist. Under D for Dad, but his name is Laufey. I know, more funny Norse names. I think you may be the only person who has known me more than five minutes and not commented on it, in fact."

"I figured you probably got enough 'god of mischief' jokes," Tony answered guilelessly.

Loki laughed. "You have no idea."

Blushing a tiny bit, Tony typed into his phone for a minute, obviously sending himself a text. Yep, abandonment issues.

"You're not going to be the kind of guy who gets the number and never calls, right?" Loki asked in his best serious tone. He knew for a fact that Tony wasn't, but he was making a point. He *wanted*

Tony to call him.

Tony just shook his head. "You work tomorrow?"

"And the next day, unfortunately," he answered immediately. "But then I have three days off. The joy of the twelve hour shift. Are we making plans for the weekend, then?"

"You'll sleep Friday morning. We could have dinner?" His voice was so hopeful that Loki couldn't even consider saying no.

"I'd love to. Why don't you put it in my phone? Wherever you want, any time after three."

That finally got a real smile. "Okay. I know a steak place downtown. Steak okay?"

"Steak is excellent," Loki agreed immediately. He didn't get out for good food often. It wasn't that he didn't have the money, it was just that he tended to be a homebody with his free time. Dating hadn't even been on his radar until a beautiful brown-eyed siren had walked into his life.

And Tony thought his voice was alluring.

After another moment, he handed the phone back, and without even checking it, Loki tucked it back into his pocket. No better way to combat abandonment issues than trust and loyalty.

However...

"We do need to talk about something, though."

Tony frowned. "Whenever you say 'talk', I get an overwhelming urge to run away."

Loki shrugged. "You're not alone, believe me."

Most of Loki's patients seemed to like him. That probably had something to do with the fact that he was more worried about the people than the rules—a fact that was probably going to get him in a lot of trouble one day. Letting someone have a few extra minutes on visits or not making them go to a group meeting that made them uncomfortable seemed like small things to Loki, but he was sure the hospital wouldn't agree. And of course, as with any mental health professional, sometimes personalities just didn't work together.

Also, just talking to someone in the profession caused overwhelming stress for some people. Often, they were the people who had already been failed by the mental healthcare system.

"You wanna talk more about my parents?" Tony sounded less bothered by that thought than Loki might have expected.

Loki shrugged. "Do you?"

"Aren't you supposed to ask leading questions or something?" Tony's obvious confusion was adorable.

"I think that's lawyers, or cops, or something like that. I'm supposed to ask *awkward* questions," Loki corrected as though there was some kind of rule involved. He supposed it was true, though. His job was often to ask the most awkward questions possible.

Tony decided to play right along with the awkward idea. "So you want to know about my sex life?"

"I'm sure I'll want to on Friday night. Tonight, maybe something a little less horrifically unprofessional of me." Loki was pretty sure he was blushing. One would think that after years of working in his chosen profession, he'd be immune to such a mundane response. Apparently not.

"You want me to get a shrink or something, don't you?" Tony asked out of the blue.

"I think it could help you, having someone to talk to." Loki tried to put a happy spin on it, but he wasn't stupid. The look on Tony's face told him all he needed to know about his opinion on therapy. "Will you at least try a low dose of antidepressants? Just to see if it helps?"

Tony frowned at that. "You think I need drugs?"

"I think you're seriously depressed, and you're so mired in the middle of it that you can't even see it's there anymore." Loki treated people with depression every day. Most of them had no idea they had an illness. "It's been there so long that it feels like normal for you. And I think antidepressants might help you climb out of that hole."

Hesitating for a moment, Tony hedged, "I can stop if I don't like it?"

"I'd appreciate it if you did it through a doctor instead of going cold turkey, but yes." Finished with the sales pitch, Loki was feeling exceptionally dirty. He knew what good the drugs could do people, but talking them into taking drugs always made him feel like a door-to-door vacuum salesman. He frowned. "A lot of people take them forever, though. You should know that. Sometimes people need to take them for the rest of their lives."

"Why?" Tony seemed to recognize the shift from professional to personal, and leaned in.

"Because depression is different for everyone." Loki wished he had a better answer, but Tony nodded in acceptance.

"Okay Doc," Tony agreed.

Loki let out a breath he hadn't even realized he was holding.

"But we're still going out Friday, right?" Those giant brown puppy eyes assaulted him, accusing him of using a date as bait to get his way, waiting for him to take it back.

"The two have nothing to do with each other," Loki denied. "The antidepressants are for you, as a medical professional. The date... is because spending time with you is making me feel distinctly unprofessional."

Tony grinned. "Unprofessional, huh?"

Loki leaned back, trying not to return the smile and failing completely. "And on that note, I think I should go, before I do something even more unprofessional. When you talk to Jaime tomorrow—Doctor Mendez—tell him what we discussed. The medical parts, unless you want me to be looking for a new job."

Tony grinned. "Tell Doctor whatisname not-quite-everything and take the happy pills from him. Got it."

When Loki arrived the next evening and Tony had already been checked out, he was inexplicably disappointed.

On the other hand, Friday wasn't too far off. He had a date, time, and place programmed into his

phone, and strangely high hopes based on less than three days acquaintance and two conversations.

He wanted to see those gorgeous eyes again. He wanted to be the stability Tony Stark needed in his life. And most of all, for the first time in a long time, Loki wanted something just for himself.

## The Courtship

The concept of a date was both thrilling and terrifying. Tony supposed there was a reason that the two words had so much in common.

Loki was smart, and beautiful, and interesting, and he seemed to instinctively understand Tony in a way no one else ever had. It sounded so perfect when he thought of it that way. Loki was like no one else he had ever met, in a way that was just... more.

But Loki understood him, and that was not good, really.

The image of Loki's body, smooth and perfect and waxen, laid out in the center of Tony's king-size bed, was still in his mind from the dreams. The way his pale skin would contrast with the crimson duvet, the slight sheen to it, the way his black hair splayed across the satin pillowcase...

Tony wasn't sure whether to jump in with both feet, or run screaming in the other direction.

He didn't like to hurt people. He hated doing it. It just seemed to inevitable whenever he got into a serious relationship. They always tried to leave him, and it always ended the same way.

As he always did when he was feeling conflicted and needed someone to talk to, he found himself in the grove with Pepper.

"I don't know what to do, Pep." He said quietly, lying on the grass, staring up at the sky. Cute little cumulus clouds drifted by, and a vague breeze brushed against his skin. "I really want this, you know? I want somebody who's gonna stay because they want to stay."

He sighed, rolling onto his side and running his fingers through the long grass.

"What if he's the one? What if he's the one who'll stay, and I ruin it because I'm too scared to try again?"

Of course, Pepper didn't have an answer. No one ever did.

He looked up from the grass to find the eyesore that was Marianne's new home. He hated that time it took before the grass started to grow again. It felt real, and ugly, and dead. Pepper had taken the longest, because he hadn't known what he was doing back then. In a few weeks, Marianne's spot would be teeming with life. New grass, and the buds of things that she'd loved. Mint, and thyme, and pristine white daisies.

He missed Marianne's laugh. It had been like nothing else in the world mattered but the fact that she was amused.

She had told him once that she wasn't good enough for him, that she was just going to hurt him. He hadn't been able to believe it at the time. He'd been too in love.

Part of him still wanted to run his hands through her thick honey-blond hair, but every time he tried to imagine it, it turned into silken black waves. He didn't want to go through the mess with Marianne again. He wanted someone who loved him, not every man who walked by.

So he left the grove and went to get ready for his date.

Maybe Loki will be the right one, he thought as he laid out his clothes.



It was a long drive into town, so he started getting ready in the middle of the afternoon. Well really, he'd started getting ready the day before, obsessing over which suit to wear. Grey or black? Which tie? Green because it reminded him of Loki, or red because it was Tony's favorite color? In the end, it was the black pinstripe with the red tie, because if nothing else, he knew people seemed to think it looked good on him.

Hopefully Loki would feel the same way. Of course, his frame of reference was a baggy set of mental ward scrubs in patient-taupe. Tony could have showed up in jeans and an AC/DC shirt, and it would have been better.

He left early and took his time driving, for no reason other than it kept him from obsessing at home. Despite the slow driving, he arrived at the restaurant almost an hour early. Waiting in the bar had its own set of dangers, so he was hesitant to do it, but with no other options, he allowed the hostess to take him into the quiet, darkened room.

Shockingly, there was Loki, nursing what looked like a white Russian (unless it was a glass of chocolate milk, which seemed an odd thing to order at a bar) and staring at the bar as though it was a puzzle.

To bother him, or not to bother him?

Oh, like that was even a real question.

"Hey Loki." He said, not even trying to sound casual.

Stunning green eyes snapped up to his, even more bright and intense than they'd been in the hospital. Taking in the whole picture, in fact, Tony was glad they'd met in the hospital, where Loki had looked slightly less intimidatingly beautiful. He wasn't sure he'd have had the confidence to approach him like that, wearing a gorgeous black suit, with a green patterned scarf draped artfully over his lapels.

It was just too much.

Please, begged the little voice in the back of his head, let him be the one.

Loki smiled nervously, hand reaching over to fiddle with the edge of his scarf. "I'd ask if it seems pathetic that I'm here so early, but I guess if you're here, I don't have to worry."

"Nah," He shook his head as he climbed onto the stool next to Loki. "Even if I weren't here, I'm not much for judging people for being nervous."

"Other things, then?" Loki joked, and Tony shook his head bashfully.

"Not much I can think of that people deserve to be judged for," Tony shrugged. "Not my place to be judge of them, even if they're doing things I don't think is right."

Loki cocked his head at that for a moment, then smiled. "A good way to look at life, I'd say."

Chuckling, Tony shook his head. "I don't know about that. I just don't like the idea of reciprocal judgement."

That made Loki laugh aloud, and it broke any tension hovering in Tony's brain.

The hostess told them then that there had been a cancellation, and would they like to be seated early?

“Definitely,” Loki nodded to her, then turned to Tony. “Less awkward than sitting at a bar, don’t you think?”

Tony nodded, perfectly happy to let Loki take the lead. It was kind of nice, actually.

They were seated in a nice quiet spot in the back, and the hostess handed them menus and left them alone. Both perused for a long moment, Tony spending more time trying not to sneak glances at Loki than actually studying the menu.

When their eyes met for the third time, Tony gave up on the menu and chuckled. “Sorry. It’s just hard to focus on something as boring as cuts of steak with you sitting right there.”

“You look nice as well, Tony,” Loki smiled at him. “Scrubs don’t do much for anyone, I’m afraid.”

Tony grinned. “I dunno, you look pretty nice in yours. Especially that set that almost matched your eyes—jesus I sound like an idiot, don’t I?”

Way to sound like a stalker, he berated himself. You couldn’t have blamed him for bailing on you when you were just pathetic, and now he knows you’re a weirdo.

“Nothing of the kind,” Loki dismissed with a vague gesture, smiling. “A smart man never complains when his date is complimenting his clothing. Now tell me, before we get distracted, you’ve filled your prescription? You’re taking them?”

Tony sighed as though put upon and nodded. “Yes, Doctor, I’m taking my crazy pills.” He didn’t feel it, though. Loki was worried about him. He cared if Tony was taking care of himself.

Loki nodded. “Good. But don’t call them that. The word crazy has too many negative connotations. People who aren’t neurotypical shouldn’t be encouraged to be ashamed of themselves.”

“That’s... actually a nice sentiment. But I didn’t come to meet with Doctor Loki. I came to make eyes at Loki.” Tony gave him his best winning grin.

Loki grinned back. “Well you’re succeeding nicely at that so far.”

Two hours later, they were still sitting at their little corner table, chatting happy over the remains of espresso and dessert. The waiter left their check for ‘whenever they were ready’, but the place was busy, and it was apparent that they were more than welcome to leave.

Tony snatched up the check and handed it back to the waiter with his credit card. When Loki looked like he wanted to protest, Tony gave him the smile again. “I asked you out, so I pay. Right?”

Loki quirked one perfect raven eyebrow at him and gave him a dubious look. “That smile lets you get away with a lot, doesn’t it?”

“Well I’m not gonna say I’m spoiled,” Tony joked, “but I’m more than willing to let you give me whatever I want.”

“Is that your way of saying that you expect sex in exchange for dinner?” Loki gave him a faux-unimpressed look.

It was strange, actually. If anyone else had said it, Tony would have taken it seriously and jumped

to correct the mistake. He certainly didn't think a date entitled him to sex. With Loki, though, he didn't even consider the possibility that it was anything but a joke.

"Well yeah," he said exaggeratedly, as though the truth were obvious. "Isn't that the way this works? Plus I bought you booze, which is extra points, right?"

Loki cocked his head as though thinking. "But you didn't pick me up and drive me here, so that balances out. Quickie in the car?"

Tony laughed. "But then I have to drive you home..."

"...a concession I will pay you for with coffee."

"Deal," Tony agreed, putting his espresso cup down and standing up. "Let's get this show on the road, then."

Loki grinned and stood as well, the two of them heading out of the restaurant.

When they reached the valet, Tony looked at him. "So in all seriousness, do you need to dr—"

Loki shook his head. "Was worried about parking, took a taxi."

Frowning, Tony shook his head as he handed the valet his ticket. "Next time, I can pick you up."

"You don't think you're getting ahead of yourself, presuming a next time?" Loki asked, his tone teasing as he leaned toward Tony.

The lean-in seemed to completely negate the implication that he didn't want to do it again, so Tony decided to go for broke. Slipping his left arm around Loki's waist, he bit his lip and then pulled out that boyish grin that worked on everyone. "I don't know, Loki, am I?"

In return, he got Loki's biggest grin to date, and a smack on his ass. "You are awful, Tony Stark." Leaning into him, Loki gave him a playful shove with his shoulder. "And of course not, but you knew that."

"I kind of did," Tony agreed.

The car arrived then, so he held the door for Loki, and headed for the driver's side. As he opened his own door, he heard a wistful female voice say, "Remember when you used to open doors for me?"

He looked up to see an older woman watching him sadly. The man who looked to be her husband held up his hand to shush her, apparently too busy on his phone to be bothered to listen to his own wife. Their car pulled up behind his and the valet hopped out.

Tony scowled as he watched the man head for the car, still chattering on his phone about 'that MacPherson account' and ignoring his wife.

Shutting his door with more force than strictly necessary, he walked over to the car behind him and opened the woman's door. She smiled at him, her eyes shining. "Thank you, young man."

He gave her the grin, and inclined his head. "Anytime, Ma'am."

She murmured something about him being a sweet boy.

He caught sight of her husband staring at him from the corner of his eye. So he swept her hand into

his and kissed it softly. "Anything for a beautiful lady."

With a nod to the confused valet, Tony went back to his own car and clambered in.

"Sorry," he told Loki, blushing. "I know it's easy for me to judge and all, but I hate when people take their spouses for granted."

"I thought you weren't one for judging?" Loki asked, his tone showing more curiosity than anything else.

Tony shrugged, trying to pretend nonchalance. "I think if someone gives you forever, you owe them some respect. And that's what marriage is, right?" He knew he was tense. It was important to him. If Loki said no, they could go their separate ways, and that would be that. Part of him, a part that was shrinking with every minute they spent together, wanted that.

Loki nodded, though. "So it is. Till death do us part and all that. A lot of people don't take it terribly seriously anymore, though."

"I do." His voice sounded oddly soft, even to himself. He wondered if Loki was going to see through him right then. Know that Tony wasn't a good person; that he wasn't a safe person to be around.

Instead of looking disgusted and jumping out of the car, Loki smiled softly and put a hand on his knee. "I can see that."

\*

The man was utterly impossible.

He was a piece of fiction that Loki had invented, because somewhere along the line, he had cracked. Loki was a drooling vegetable lying in his own hospital's coma ward, and he had dreamed up Tony Stark to make a perfect little snow globe of a life.

What thirty year old man went out of his way to make someone his mother's age feel beautiful and wanted?

Talked seriously about marriage, and his opinion of it on the first date?

Joked about sex in a tone that said he didn't expect it at all?

That was it. Tony Stark was fiction.

He directed Tony to park in the extra parking space his apartment had allotted to him, right next to his own Prius, and they headed for the elevator. He was on the fifth floor, and most days he took the stairs, but he didn't really want Tony to see him sweaty and disgusting. At least, not in that context, and not yet.

Once they arrived, he headed for the kitchen to put coffee on. He'd offered coffee, after all, so he

would make coffee in case Tony actually wanted it.

He wondered absently if catering to Tony's abandonment issues was going to grate on him after a while, but given what he dealt with every day at work, it seemed unlikely. A little reassurance here and there was nothing compared to having to constantly watch someone to keep them from hurting anyone. Those patients usually passed quickly to a long-term-care facility, but he dealt with it so often that it felt like a normal thing.

Tony just needed Loki to be there, and make sure he knew it. It was kind of sweet, in a way.

When Loki got back from setting the coffeepot going, he found Tony looking at the pictures on his mantle.

Tony pointed at one. "Your dad?"

"That's him," Loki nodded. Pointing to an older picture, he added "This is him with my mother before I was born."

"She was beautiful," Tony smiled at him. "They look really happy together."

Grinning, Loki nodded again. "They were. They were pretty crazy back then. Members of Greenpeace, always looking for something dangerous to protest. It's a wonder either of them lived long enough to have me."

Tony obviously tried to keep his wince to himself, but failed utterly.

"Is something wrong?" Loki asked, wondering how his parents' obsessive activism could bother Tony.

"No, no, it's just—remember how you said your dad would like me? Pretty unlikely." He looked so sad that Loki wanted to hug him, and Loki wasn't much for hugging. "My company makes weapons for the government. It's pretty much all they do."

Loki blinked at that revelation for a moment. "Stark. SI. Of course. I should have connected it. Well now I feel foolish."

"Foolish?" Tony looked downright nervous all of a sudden.

"I should have recognized the name." Loki was as much berating himself as talking to Tony. "You used to be on the cover of every magazine I can think of. You look different with the goatee, though."

Rolling his eyes, Tony nodded. "That's why I grew it. Trying to escape being Anthony Edward Stark."

"I suppose it's too much to hope that you're opposed to the whole 'making weapons' thing," Loki questioned. He wasn't his parents. He didn't feel a need to protest every little thing that seemed wrong, but the thought of Tony using his intelligence to dream up ways to blow people up was a little unsettling.

"I don't work for the company," Tony shook his head. "I'm not gonna say I don't profit by the sale of weapons, and my CEO keeps harassing me to 'get back to work' designing bigger and better explosives, but I just—" he paused for a long moment, obviously weighing his words. "I think that building bigger and better bombs to kill more people from further distances is against every better human instinct."



Loki was stunned into silence for a moment. "...and you don't think my father would like you?"

"I haven't stopped SI from making the weapons they make," Tony shrugged, and looked at the floor. "Besides, it's not like I'm such a nice guy. I just think that killing people without understanding the consequences makes us less."

Coffee forgotten and Laufey's opinion be damned, Loki leaned in and pressed his lips to Tony's.

Tony's eyes flew open, and they stared at each other. Instead of breaking apart or closing his eyes as the rules of kissing demanded, Loki wrapped an arm around Tony's waist and pulled himself in closer. He parted his lips slightly, and took Tony's plump lower lip between his teeth, pressing lightly and slowly pulling away.

Their eyes locked the entire time, Tony's expression was painted with surprise. When their lips parted, he stuttered, "W-Wha... What was that for?"

Loki's hair had fallen forward when he'd leaned in for the kiss, and Tony leaned to one side, to let it brush his face as Loki pulled away.

"For being completely unlike anyone else I've ever met. For not being some testosterone addled nitwit who's secretly in love with the idea of blowing things up." Loki smiled at him, pushing his unruly hair back behind one ear.

Tony smiled and blushed a bit at that, but he didn't even try to deny it. Modest, but not false modesty. There had to be something wrong with him. He just didn't make any sense as he was.

"So, since you're here, and coffee is brewing, do you want to... I don't know, watch television or something like that?" Loki asked, not wanting Tony to leave. "I have quite a few DVDs, though I confess to never having watched the majority. Lorelei thinks it's amusing to give me things she thinks will shock me."

"What kind of DVDs is she giving you?" Tony asked, tone a little concerned.

Not able to hold back a laugh at the expression on Tony's face, Loki shook his head in lieu of proper response while he caught his breath, and motioned to the cabinet. "No-nothing like that. I suspect she just thinks I'm a complete innocent."

Opening the little doors on the DVD case, Tony started perusing its contents. "Oh, I get you. She thinks you're going to be scandalized by the fact that drugs exist and sex happens." He held up the first season of *Breaking Bad* with a raised eyebrow. "Guessing you haven't watched this?"

"No. But it was indeed a gift from Lorelei," Loki shook his head. "It's bad, isn't it?"

"It's not bad, it's just the kind of thing you'd give someone you wanted to scandalize." Tony shrugged. "Oh, there you go. *Game of Thrones*. Everyone's watched that."

Loki just looked at him, eyebrow up.

"No?"

"Afraid not," Loki shook his head. It was a little embarrassing, how little he kept up with popular culture.

Tony grinned. "Me either. Wanna give it a shot?"

Little did either of them know just what they'd just gotten themselves into.

At two AM, Tony threw his head back against the couch and groaned. "I—I really can't do another one. Dammit. I have to get going if I'm going to get home and into bed before dawn."

"Dawn?" Loki asked, shocked. "How far from here do you live?"

"Hour and a half, two hours," Tony responded easily, as though it wasn't anything out of the ordinary.

"Two hours! You're not driving two hours at this time of night." Loki allowed no question in his voice. It wasn't quite an order, but it was close enough.

Tony was amused. "Is that your way of suggesting we watch another episode?"

"Well..." Loki let his voice trail off suggestively. "Maybe not just this minute. In the morning? Unless you have something else to do?" He worried that he was somehow taking advantage of Tony's issues, but he was a man consumed. He had to know what happened next. And for some reason, he didn't want to know without Tony.

Tony ended up sleeping on his couch so they could continue watching the show together when they woke up.

Loki woke to the smell of bacon. His stomach rumbled loudly as his eyes opened. He hadn't smelled breakfast upon waking since he was a child. Sometimes on weekends, Laufey would make eggs and bacon, and if Loki was very lucky, pancakes.

Living on his own, if he wanted bacon he had to get up and make it himself, so he never woke to it. It was one of those downsides to being an adult that no one had warned him about: a lack of bacon in the morning.

But there it was. And maybe more importantly, bacon meant something else.

Loki had let a virtual stranger stay in his home overnight, and apparently, instead of stealing his television or other nefarious deeds, the stranger in question was providing him breakfast.

An unfortunate incident the previous year had left Loki a little shy of dating altogether, hence his relative hesitance in the matter of touching. Not only had Tony completely respected his boundaries, he'd slept on his couch and... bacon.

He leapt up, rushed through his morning ablutions, and wandering out into the kitchen, found Tony hovering over the oven.

"Hey! I, um, I didn't want to wake you. But I didn't want to leave, and I was really hungry, so I hope you don't mind..."

"Bacon?" Loki asked, his voice still scratchy from sleep.

That elicited a grin from Tony, who nodded. He opened the oven to reveal a tray of warm bacon, and something else in one of Loki's infrequently used glass baking dishes.

Noting the direction of Loki's gaze and the curiosity, Tony was quick to try to explain. "Um, french toast, kind of. It's how my... Jarvis used to make it."

"Your Jarvis?" Loki asked, intrigued by both food and another insight into Tony's life.

Tony nodded. "He was kind of my dad's... butler? Not the right word, really, but he taught me how to cook. Which is probably why I can make tea, but my coffee is really bad."

"Hence not making any?" Loki asked, amused.

Tony's face scrunched up in something resembling apologetic embarrassment. "Sorry?"

Loki laughed outright at that. "For not making bad coffee?" He portioned coffee beans into the grinder, and started it running. "I think I can forgive that. But only if you plate breakfast while I'm making good coffee."

"Sir, Yessir!" Tony mock saluted and grabbed the nearest potholder.

Eight minutes later, Loki was pouring coffee into mugs, and Tony was pulling warm maple syrup from the microwave.

During his second helping, Loki considered proposing marriage on the spot. When Tony offered him the last slice of bacon from his own plate, he almost went down on one knee right then and there.

"So," Loki began as he refilled their coffee mugs. "Shall we see where Ned gets himself today?"

Tony sighed, but nodded. "You know this can't lead anywhere good, right? I mean, it's Sean Bean."

"What?"

"Sean Bean," Tony prompted, as though the point was obvious. "You know. Lord of the Rings? Equilibrium?"

Loki shrugged. "I read the Lord of the Rings once. Don't know what the other thing is."

"Equi... You've never seen Equilibrium?" Tony looked quite literally horrified. He tore out into the living room and started sifting through Loki's DVD collection. "How can anyone have not seen Equilibrium? It's a classic!"

Befuddled, Loki just followed him and watched as he looked through every single DVD on the shelves. Finally turning back to face Loki, he looked so much like a sad puppy that Loki found himself promising, "I'll order it. We can watch it next weekend. For now, Ned Stark. He's got to make sure Robert knows what that wife of his is up to."

By noon, they were both staring at the screen, glassy-eyed.

"I hate this show," Tony whispered, voice slightly whiny. "Do you have the next season?"

Loki nodded and pointed to the shelf. "There. Put it in."

By the time Loki went back to work Monday morning, he and Tony had a firm date for Friday with the couch and the third season of that infernal show. Maybe the fourth, too.

And Equilibrium, whatever that was.

## Heaven is a Place...

Three months later, Tony was in heaven. Not literally, of course. Even in the unlikely event that such a place existed, Tony knew he wasn't getting in. But if, as some 80s singer had claimed, heaven was a place on earth, then Tony had found it.

It was Loki's adorable little one-bedroom apartment.

He spent every weekend there. They had watched almost all of the decent television shows they could find, and dozens of movies, documentaries, and even some cartoons. They spent every day Loki got off work curled up on his old plaid couch, watching television.

Sometimes they actually watched. A month in, the kissing started in earnest. Sometimes they got so wrapped up in it that they missed entire episodes.

Tony decided that kissing Loki was his favorite art form, and his skill level was directly represented by how far behind they got in whatever they were supposed to be watching.

He was balanced over Loki, all of his weight in his knees and left hand, the other combing its fingers through Loki's hair as he kissed him. Slowly, passionately, stopping every now and then to press their foreheads together and just look into Loki's eyes.

"Wait," Loki frowned, leaning down toward the couch. "Did he just say the girl was the killer? To please her father? How awful."

Tony nodded, knowing the show in question. "He treated her like a second class citizen, so she decided she had to do whatever necessary to make him proud."

Loki shook his head sadly. "I don't know what I'd do with a father like that."

"I do," Tony sighed before he could stop himself.

Loki turned a calculating eye on him, and he threw his hands up in supplication. That unbalanced him, and he tumbled right down into Loki. Every inch of their fronts was pressed together quite suddenly, and it was apparent that the make-out session had been affecting both of them.

Since they had started the kissing, Loki had been hesitant to take it further, and Tony respected that. Whatever the reasoning, Tony was fine with waiting. He was in it for keeps, so however long it took Loki was fine.

This time, though, Loki smirked and ran a hand over the curve of Tony's back. "It seems I know what you'd *like* to do..."

Tony couldn't hide his grin at that. "Always. Guess your happy-pill side effects haven't hit me there."

That earned him a concerned look. "Have you been having side effects, Tony? You should "

"It's fine Doc," Tony used the nickname whenever Loki got too domineering, or treated Tony like a patient. "I'm a little more worried about the side effects of having my beautiful boyfriend lying underneath me just now."

Loki snorted. "You're always worried about that particular side effect. I'm starting to think it's

more cause than effect.”

Laughing, Tony nodded. “You mean the cause of all testosterone-related stupidity? But I can’t blame it, really. Big Tony controls him pretty well when he needs to, whether he likes it or not.”

Flipping both of them onto their sides, Tony wrapped his arms around Loki and leaned in for another long lazy kiss.

Loki smiled when he pulled back. “Why don’t you press for more, Tony? I know you want it.”

That was the multi-million dollar question. Was it really time to have a serious conversation about their relationship? Well, it wasn’t as though there was going to be a better time. And before they had sex was better than after.

He sighed, and ran his hands along Loki’s back, fingers catching lightly on the cotton t-shirt he was wearing. “I’m not an easy guy to put up with, Loki.”

“On the contrary,” Loki protested. “I’ve found you remarkably easy to put up with.”

There was an unpleasant twisting in Tony’s gut. Part of him just wanted to tell Loki everything, and let the chips fall where they may. It was one of the worst ideas he’d ever had, but it felt better to him than just letting things progress. Tony had been down that road before, and it wasn’t one he wanted to travel again, much less with Loki.

The idea of Loki in the grove was even more unsettling than those nights when he stared at the ceiling and contemplated the grove’s existence at all. He wanted to protect Loki from everything, including himself.

If he were a better man, he knew, he would have walked away from Loki before they had gotten started.

“There are a lot of things you don’t know about me, Loki.” Tony pulled away far enough to see all of Loki’s face. “I have the feeling I’ve somehow given you a false impression of me.”

“Because I think you’re a good person?” Loki asked guilelessly.

Tony nodded. “Yes.”

Instead of giving the expected empty platitudes, Loki shrugged. “Then show me. I’ve never seen you as anything but the sweet man who sleeps on my couch, makes me breakfast, and never does anything that makes me uncomfortable.”

“I don’t want to act like an ass to drive you off. I just...” Tony wasn’t sure how to express what he wanted Loki to know, without just explaining everything to him. Maybe just take the path of least resistance. “I just want to stay like this forever.”

That just earned him a snort. “Well who wouldn’t?” Loki leaned down to nip at Tony’s lower lip. “This is as close to perfect as I’ve ever had. You make me happy. I know I’m not supposed to say things like that, but it’s true. Every time I get to the end of my work week, all I can think is that I finally get to see you again.”

Smiling bashfully, Tony opened and closed his mouth a few times before he could manage to find words. “You make me pretty happy, too. I’ve never dated anyone like you before.”

Loki chuckled. Freeing one hand to motion toward his body with a flourish, he put on a bright

obnoxious grin. "How could you have? There are no men like me."

"Is this where I suggest you're angelic in origin, and you smack me for being cheesy?" Tony found himself grinning back, completely distracted from his earlier train of thought.

"I don't know, are you going to say something that ridiculous?" Loki raised his hand as though waiting to be forced to whack Tony.

Hiding his face in his hands, Tony shook his head. "Of course not, Angel."

Loki whacked his hands lightly, then leaned down to nibble on his fingers, the distracting mynx. "So, I believe we were talking about sex."

"Were we?" Tony asked innocently.

That single elegant eyebrow rose in disbelief. "So you don't want to have sex?"

"I didn't say that!" Tony protested. It was nothing like that. In fact, there were few things in the world he wanted more. "I just don't... I don't want to push you into anything, Loki. And you're hesitant. I'm not blind or stupid. I know you're hesitant for a reason, and you're more important to me than sex, so I can wait as long as you need."

"What if I said I've had as long as I need?" Loki smiled and cupped Tony's cheek in one hand.

Tony froze. What if Loki had waited long enough? What if they started sleeping together, and then Loki decided to leave him? He shook his head, as though that could clear the stupid thoughts. Sex wasn't going to change anything between them at all. Tony was damned good in bed. He knew that from experience. If you sucked, surely everyone wouldn't lie and tell you you were amazing, would they?

So if sex wasn't going to change anything, why was he so hesitant about it?

Moving his hands to slide around Loki's waist, Tony pressed himself up at the waist to capture Loki's lips with his own for a long, soft, surprisingly chaste kiss. When he finally let go, he smiled up at Loki. "Then I'd say I hope you're prepared, because I sure didn't bring anything with me."

Breath catching, Loki's mouth fell open. "Just like that?"

"Like you said, Loki, we were waiting because you were uncomfortable." Tony let his fingers rub small circles into the sensitive skin of Loki's lower back. "This was never about me."

Loki blinked a few times before nodding. "And if I say I'd rather keep waiting..."

"Then we keep waiting. I don't think you understand how much more important than sex our relationship is to me." Tony widened the circles, tentatively slipping down to cup Loki's perfectly rounded ass with both hands. "I want you. All of you. But if you need time, then it's yours."

Loki arched up into Tony's hands and then grinned. "So sure you're going to be on top, are you?"

Tony laughed. "Babe, I don't give a damn whose what goes where. Sex is just a way to get even closer to you."

It was true that he hadn't spent a lot of time on bottom in his relationships with men, but he suspected that had been more because of the other men than because of Tony. He wasn't joking in the least. He just wanted the extra intimacy. Who was on top was only relevant as far as the

mechanics of the act. He wanted to see Loki's pupils blown wide in arousal, his smooth skin covered with a sheen of sweat, his face contorted in ecstasy.

Loki's hands lowered to cup both sides of Tony's head, and he lowered his face for another kiss. He closed his eyes, pressing their lips lightly together, rubbing back and forth with feather-light strokes before flicking his tongue out to brush against Tony's lower lip. When his eyes opened again, he took a deep breath and started talking.

"It shouldn't have been a big deal," he started, his voice steady and even. Anyone else might have thought he was talking about something unimportant, but Tony heard the tension behind the forced calm. "One of the nurses at work set me up with an old college friend. You know how it is, they find out you're gay and *wow*, they know that *one* gay guy, so obviously the two of you would be perfect together."

Tony rolled his eyes and nodded. He hadn't been in the situation, but it was familiar enough.

"He seemed nice enough until we were walking home. He started getting insistent about how a date should end." Loki looked away for a long moment, his eyes far away, like he was back on that date. "It wasn't as though we were those boring straight types, after all. He actually said that. Like only straight people don't have sex on a first date. Like there was some rule saying that by going on a date, I had implicitly agreed to sleep with him."

There was nothing Tony could say. Everything that came to mind was either a meaningless platitude, or it implied Tony could empathize when he obviously couldn't. So he just nodded again, stroking Loki's back and waiting for the story to continue, despite the sudden urge he was having to hunt down this horrible man and kill him.

"I tried to pass him off when we got to my door, tell him I was tired and had work the next day. But he pushed me against the door, and... well, I reacted. I'd say I considerably reduced the chances he would ever be able to procreate, should he make an attempt to do so." Loki sighed and shook his head, then turned his face back and focused once again on Tony. "What are you smiling about?"

Tony literally couldn't wipe the grin off his face. "You. You're fucking amazing. Some guy thinks you owe him sex, so you make him sing soprano. I was starting to worry that he'd hurt you physically as well as traumatizing you. But no. You kicked his ass just like he deserved."

Loki's usual little smirk reappeared, and it did Tony's heart a world of good. "I did do pretty well, didn't I?"

"Damn right you did. No wonder you've been worried about sex, though." Tony scowled. "You don't wanna give me his name and address at all, do you?"

"And you don't think I'm overreacting by being nervous about sex more than a year later?" Loki prodded.

Tony couldn't hide his shock. "What? You're not allowed to be traumatized because it could have been worse? It's not a goddamned competition, Babe. There's always someone out there who has it better or worse than you."

Loki beamed down at him, and for just a second, Tony felt like the person Loki thought he was. He was a good guy. He made Loki feel better, and it felt perfect.

"Tony?" Loki whispered, leaning down to brush their lips together again.

"Yeah Babe?"

"I'm definitely ready."

\*

Loki had been planning for almost a month. Tony had given him all the space he could possibly need, and Loki suspected he'd keep right on waiting if it was asked of him. Scratch that, Loki had asked, and Tony had said outright that he was willing to keep waiting.

On the other hand, Loki was done waiting.

Between infrequent dating and then the niggling reminder of that one awful night, he hadn't gotten laid in almost two years. Celibacy had never been the goal; it was just an annoyance that seemed to have been thrust upon him.

He was more than ready for it. He'd been thinking about how things would change afterward, and didn't see a downside. Falling asleep next to Tony seemed like a much better option than falling asleep knowing Tony was lying on his lumpy old couch—less than ten yards away, but completely out of touching range.

So when he slid off that couch and held his hand out to Tony that afternoon, he knew exactly what he was doing.

He'd bought the condoms and lube on his way home from work the evening before and stashed them under his pillow, since his meager supply of furniture didn't include a nightstand with a convenient drawer.

Tony seemed equal parts bemused and excited. When they reached the bedroom and Loki produced his 'supplies' like he was performing a magic trick, bemused disappeared. "You're really...?"

"So ready I'm going to jump on you. If you don't get it together and jump on me right this minute, that is." Loki grinned, kneeling on the bed, prizes clutched in either hand.

Hesitation gone, Tony stalked to the bed, grabbed the condoms from Loki's right hand and the lube from his left, and tossed them on the bed. "I want to see you naked first," he demanded, yanking Loki's shirt up.

Loki was more than on board with that idea, so he helped Tony push his shirt up over his head and then immediately moved his hands to untie the drawstring on the sweatpants he'd donned for the lazy day on the couch.

He had actually briefly considered dressing a little more provocatively, but that felt wrong. The whole idea of pretending to be something else just wasn't Loki-and-Tony.

Tony leaned forward to capture his lips as he pushed his sweatpants down over his hips, and proceeded to wrap his arms around Loki and pull him in for a passionate kiss. It was considerably more PG-13 than what they usually played at on the couch, a clash of tongues and lips. Their front



teeth clicked together as they parted.

Tony leaned back and held Loki at arm's length. "Fuck, Babe. You are... amazing."

Warmth suffused Loki's chest, and he could feel a flush creeping into his cheeks. "I'd return the compliment, but you're still fully clothed." He snapped his fingers and pointed at Tony. "Fix it."

Grinning, Tony nodded and reached for the hem of his own t-shirt.

Loki had run his hands over those abs often enough when they were clothed that the six-pack wasn't a shock, but it didn't change the fact that he wanted to lean down and lick what he saw. So he did. Leaning down, he gave one nipple a quick bite, and then licked a trail down toward Tony's navel. Leaning his head back minutely, he looked up to meet his lover's eyes challengingly.

Tony raised a lazy eyebrow and gave him that adorable boyish grin in response.

Deciding that was answer enough, Loki reached for Tony's fly. He made short work of the faded blue jeans Tony wore, and was left with nothing more than a pair of dark red boxer briefs.

"I'd have gone for something a little less worn if I'd expected to be showing them off," Tony joked, sounding only slightly self-conscious.

Loki shook his head, thinking of his own sweatpants. "I'd say they're perfect. Just like you. Now get rid of them."

Tony let himself fall onto his back, the top of his head facing the end of Loki's bed. The adorable grin on his face only got wider as he slowly pushed his underwear down over his hips. Loki could feel that intense gaze on him, but he couldn't have torn his eyes away from the expanse of skin being exposed if his life had depended on it. He couldn't help the smirk that curled onto his lips as Tony's flushed cock came into view. It was perfect; thick and tipped with a deep red. He was uncut too, which was rather new to Loki. He found that he liked it.

Reaching down to take it in one hand and play with the foreskin, he turned his smirk on Tony and affected a surprised tone. "For me? Is it my birthday?"

Laughing, Tony wrapped his hand around Loki's and guided him into a slow stroke. "Babe, if this is all you want for your birthday, you've got a pleasant surprise coming up in a few months."

He tried not to go all warm and squishy inside at the fact that Tony remembered when his birthday was. (He hadn't dated a lot; maybe it was what people did. He certainly remembered Tony's.) He shook his head to clear it: there was a more pressing matter at hand. He stood and stripped himself of his own underwear, before reaching for the lube bottle. "Do you want to do it, or do you want to —"

Before he even finished the idea, Tony was sitting up and making grabby hands at the bottle.

Amused, Loki played a brief game of keep-away, using his superior reach to his advantage.

Ever one to play dirty, Tony pulled Loki in tight with his right arm and kissed him with a ferocity that took his breath away. Loki's concentration broke almost instantly—it wasn't as though he had a vested interest in keeping Tony from getting what he wanted—and his hands were drawn in to rest on Tony's shoulders.

Tony grabbed the bottle and then rolled Loki down onto the bed, climbing on top of him.

"I see you feel strongly about this," Loki chuckled, relaxing into the mattress.

"I feel strongly about most things," Tony agreed, sitting back on his heels between Loki's thighs. He used his knees to push Loki's legs further apart, and took a long look.

The intensity in his eyes made Loki shiver. "Stop looking and do, dammit." He prodded his back with one heel.

That made Tony smile even wider. "Impatient, are we?"

"Yes!"

Flipping open the cap of the lube bottle, Tony coated the fingers on his right hand. His grin turned wicked, and he looked down at Loki. "What do you think, Nurse? Is the patient ready?"

"The patient is the opposite of patient. Get on with it!" Loki demanded. Then he changed tactics. Irritation wasn't getting him what he wanted, he'd have to be a little... softer. "Want you," he panted, pulling air between his closed teeth. "Want you in me."

Tony let his body fall forward, bracing his weight on one elbow. "You're terrible, you know that?" His pupils were totally blown, though, and his breathing rapid.

"As long as it gets me what I want," Loki conceded the point. "I do what I have to do."

Tony snorted. "You do what you want, and we both know it."

"Isn't that what you love most about m—" Loki cut off mid-word when he realized what he was saying.

Fuck. That was months premature, at least. What a great way to chase off the best thing that had happened in Loki's life since the invention of coffee.

Tony paused, finally having been about to give in to Loki's demands. One finger pressed lightly to Loki's ass, he looked him in the eye for a long moment. Then he pushed, and the sudden intake of breath on Loki's part wasn't at all faked. "It *is* what I love most about you, actually. That," he said as he started working his finger in and out, "and the fact that you care more about things than you're willing to admit."

"Can we not talk about me feeding stray cats while your fingers are in my ass?" Loki tried to break the seriousness of the moment. "Though I suppose," he chuckled breathlessly. "The way you look at me when I'm putting cans of cat food on the fire escape is one of the things I love about you."

That got a chuckle, but Loki could hear the relief in it. Abandonment issues. "What can I say? My first love was Cat Woman."

Then they were both laughing, Tony with his head on Loki's chest, and any tension caused by the subject was gone.

When Tony pulled his head back up a moment later, the intensity was starting to return to his eyes. It made Loki's heart flutter wildly, that look of utter concentration, devotion, longing. He almost didn't notice that Tony had graduated to two fingers, but then the pads of those fingers flickered against his prostate and he gasped.

Tony shot him a sly grin. "That the spot?"

"Mmmh," he whimpered, his attempt at an affirmative response cut off when Tony very deliberately brushed the spot again. Instead of trying again, he just nodded.

Tony leaned down next to him and whispered, "That good, Babe? You want another?"

All Loki could do was keep nodding. Ye gods, it had been far too long.

When Tony added the third finger, Loki felt a tear slip down the side of his face. He turned his face to scrub it away on the duvet, but Tony noticed and paused. "Everything okay? Need me to stop?"

"NO!" Loki almost sat up, fingers inside him or not. "Don't you dare fucking stop."

Leaning down over him, Tony smiled softly. "Okay." And then he kissed Loki again, just as soft and sweet as his voice.

When Tony pulled his face away a moment later, Loki pushed his whole body down into those beautiful deft fingers. "Now, Tony. I'm ready now. Fuck me."

"Bossy bottom," Tony grinned, but immediately complied. He pulled his fingers free of Loki, who couldn't help but whimper at the loss, and reached for the condoms.

"You love it when I'm bossy," Loki countered, angling his hips up impatiently.

"I do love it when you're bossy," Tony agreed. As fast as a person could, he opened the box, grabbed a condom, ripped it open and slipped it over his straining cock. His eyes immediately rose to meet Loki's, and he held his gaze as he pulled a calf up onto his shoulder. Holding himself in his other hand, he inched forward.

Loki could feel the fat cockhead sliding against his skin as it slowly lined up with his ass. He sighed in satisfaction.

Leaning back down and pressing Loki's thigh almost flush to his own chest, Tony stared intently into Loki's eyes as he pushed inside.

There was something almost unbearably intimate about that eye contact, but even so, Loki didn't want to break it. It felt like they were making a pact, signing a contract.

This is who we are now. This is what we do.

*This is forever.*

Before Loki could dwell on the idea, Tony started to move inside him, and thought was swept away by a wave of sensation. It started slowly, picking up just enough speed to take Loki's breath away, but not a punishing pace by anyone's standards. When Tony started brushing against his prostate on every third stroke, there could be no doubt that it was deliberate.

Loki didn't know what insane men and women had left Tony before him, but he was grateful. This was his because they were fools. "Tony," he whispered. He was barely able to form cogent thought, but that one seemed important. "Tony. I love you."

"I love you, Loki." Tony whispered in return. "Fuck, you're so beautiful. Love you—" He broke off to increase his speed again, and suddenly every third stroke became every single stroke, and, and, and...

Loki only vaguely felt his body arch upward, saw Tony lean back to grasp his cock and stroke it as he came, was already coming. It seemed to go on and on as Tony continued pumping into him, hitting his prostate again and again. He melted into the bed and let his eyes slip shut for a second.

It was only when he opened them again that he realized a second had turned into something more. He was still lying on his bed, but Tony was curled up against him snoring softly. They were cocooned in Loki's duvet together, and it was dark outside. A cursory inspection told him that Tony had cleaned up after their shenanigans, and just let Loki sleep.

He leaned down and kissed Tony's forehead, making his lover wriggle against him and stop snoring for a moment, scrubbing his face into Loki's chest. Then he sighed, and settled back down.

Smiling, Loki let his eyes slip shut again.

## Too Hot

It was a terrible idea.

Tony should have run from it the second it had come up, but he'd always been lacking somewhat in the common sense department. In fact, it was his fault that it had come up at all.

August brought a nasty heat wave with it, and two weeks into the month, Loki's central air broke down. They had to replace the air conditioning unit, and it was going to be a week and a half before they could get to that. In ninety degree weather, with nearly a hundred percent humidity the whole time. Even worse, Loki's apartment complex did not have a pool.

How was Tony supposed to live two weeks in that heat without so much as a pool to cool down?

Call him wimpy, but he'd grown up in California, not the Sahara freaking desert. He was used to mild summers, even milder winters, and constant air conditioning at the slightest hint of too much heat. Even his ranch house in the middle of nowhere had it. Of course, his ranch house in the middle of nowhere had almost everything he could possibly want. Air conditioning, check. Pool, check. Indoors, no less, so that he didn't have to clean leaves and the like out of it.

He'd thought about keeping horses, but that required either a lot of effort on his part, or a hired hand living on the ranch, and that was unacceptable. No one came or went without Tony's strict supervision. He didn't like having people on his property.

So why had he invited Loki to stay for a long weekend?

Oh yeah, the heat.

Tony tossed the last weed into the compost bag off to his left, then sat back on his haunches and stretched. He patted the earth to tamp it back down where the weed had come out, and looked over his finished work. It was perfect. The blackberry bush against the trees was looking better, and the weeds were taken care of. He supposed he could use some kind of herbicide, but he preferred not. Too likely it would kill the things that he wanted there.

Peeling his sweaty shirt away from his chest, he flapped it back and forth to try to get some air moving. It was an unusually still day for the area. Probably not the best day for him to be doing his outside chores, but his choices were relatively limited. He'd been putting it off for two weeks, hoping that the heat would let up. It hadn't. And Loki was coming that night, Thursday, to stay through Monday. He'd even taken an extra day off for it.

So Tony was doing his weeding on Thursday afternoon. That way, he could spend the whole weekend with his boyfriend, not thinking about the things he needed to do.

All the contracts Obadiah had sent over had been read, signed, and sent back. He'd read his quarterly report from the board, and talked to his accountant. Everything with Stark Industries seemed to be on target. He'd checked the pH of the pool and adjusted appropriately. He'd used some kind of 'plant food' on the blackberries, since they were a little the worse for wear after all the heat and strange lack of rain. Then there was just the weeding, and he was done.

Pushing himself to his feet, he rolled his shoulders to work the kinks out and walked over to the compost bag. It was a pain in the ass to carry it all the way back to the house every time he was done weeding. Maybe he should buy a wheelbarrow.

No, that felt lazy. It wasn't like a little extra exercise was bad for him.

He had just enough time to shower and change before Loki was supposed to arrive, and he wanted to do that. Kind of rude to invite a guest and then be covered with dirt and sweat when they arrived. Tossing the compost bag on the bin, he went in to get ready.

He showered and changed as slowly as he could bring himself to do, but he was full of nervous energy. He hadn't had anyone to the ranch since Marianne, and he didn't want to think about her.

After spending all week worrying about what he was going to wear, he had decided not to go to any unusual lengths to impress Loki. They'd seen each other naked; what else was there to be worried about?

Thinking of seeing Loki naked did wonders to ease any remaining anxiety. Seeing Loki naked was definitely going to make the weekend easier.

After dressing, he went down to check on dinner—he'd finally decided on stew, since he'd had no time to spend cooking—and it was bubbling away in the pot. There was fresh bread and a bottle of merlot to round it out, and if Tony knew Loki as well as he thought he did, it was going to be the perfect thing for getting over a long day at work and then a long drive up into the middle of nowhere.

Tony's ranch was pretty far from the city, and he liked it that way. Privacy, quiet, and all the space he could possibly need. Finding it had been serendipity, spotting the sign on a night drive years earlier. That had been at a low point in Tony's life, and moving to the ranch had improved everything.

He didn't hear Loki's car, but the alarm system told him that someone was coming up the drive. There was no one else it could be. So Tony made one last mad dash around the kitchen and living room, making sure everything was in order. It was a silly thing to do, really, considering how many times he'd already checked everything over. He was fluffing a pillow on the couch for what had to be the fifteenth time when the doorbell rang.

Like a teenager about to go on his first date, he bounded for the door. He was not going to let Loki wait on him at the door. His socks slid a bit on the slippery hardwood in the foyer, and he had to brace himself on the door when he almost slid right into it. Okay, maybe a little too fast.

Pulling back, he opened the door, and... well, there was Loki. He supposed it wasn't exactly the kind of thing that came with fanfare, but he couldn't help being both terrified and thrilled by having Loki at his place. Loki had really come to him, chosen him. It was a good thing.

Loki grinned at him. "Everything alright? You look a bit out of breath."

"Just, you know, making sure everything looks okay," he answered, finding that he was indeed a bit out of breath. It was almost certainly more Loki's presence than exertion, but he refrained from saying that. Even in his head, that sounded weird.

Meanwhile, Loki looked surprised. "Tony, tell me you didn't clean for me!"

"Why not?" he asked, offended on Loki's behalf. "You're worth cleaning for."

Immediately, Loki leaned in for a small kiss. It was barely a peck on the lips, but it snatched Tony's breath away. "I've never cleaned for you, you know."

Tony grinned. "You're a naturally tidy person. You don't wanna know what this place looks like

when it's just me."

He held his hand out to take Loki's bag, and ignored the vague protest about being able to carry his own bag as he sauntered down the hall to his bedroom.

"I know you can carry your own bag," he turned and said to Loki as he opened the door. "But you didn't know where my bedroom was." Then he paused. "If, that is... if you want to stay in my—"

"Shut up and put my bag on your bed, Tony."

So Tony did. Actually, he got a tiny thrill when Loki said things like that.

"So, this is my bedroom," he said lamely. "It's... well, a bedroom. You know, I'd show you around the house, but it's really all this boring. Bedrooms, bathrooms, kitchen, living room, dining room... If you want to wander around, you can check out whatever you want."

Loki laughed. "No secret room where you keep all your dead wives?"

Tony's head jerked back a bit as he blinked in shock and horror. *Joke*, he told himself, trying to snap out of it. *It was just a joke.*

Fortunately, Loki wasn't paying any attention to Tony's reaction. He'd turned back to the bed and started pulling various things out. "The bathroom is there?" He pointed at the adjoining door.

"Yeah," Tony agreed, probably too fast. "You can put whatever you need to in there, and there's room in the closet on your right if you want to hang anything up. I'm gonna go check on dinner." He headed back to the kitchen.

*Way to be*, he berated himself all the way. *He makes a joke and you practically have a mental breakdown.*

He stirred the stew again. It was doing well, at least. Turning to the island, he started going through the drawers. It didn't matter how many times he told himself that he was going to remember where he left the corkscrew, every time he had to use it, he had to search for it first. He found it in the third drawer he searched, and grabbed the bottle of wine from the fridge. He was sure there was something heretical about serving wine out of the fridge, but he didn't really know or care about wine etiquette. He knew Loki didn't much care about things like that either, so it worked out.

He busied himself around the kitchen, pulling bowls out of one cupboard and wine glasses out of another, and pulling out a serrated knife to use on the crusty bread. He was grabbing the spoons from a drawer when Loki wandered in, looking overwhelmed.

"This place is enormous," he breathed. "How do you not get lost?"

Tony couldn't hold back his laughter. "I don't think it's that big. Or if it is that big, there aren't that many rooms. The family house was one of those old-school New England places with the tiny rooms and oddly tilted floors, and secret passages. I didn't want that kind of thing, so this was perfect."

Gods, he hoped that Loki didn't have an issue with his money. That had been one of Eric's cited reasons for leaving.

*I don't want to be a kept boy*, Tony, he'd said as he was packing his things to leave. *Besides, I left home to see the world, and however big your house is, it's not what I wanted.*

When Tony had offered to take him wherever he wanted to go, he'd just laughed at kept packing. Tony missed his smile. He had these adorable dimples that made Tony melt every time. The laugh, Tony did not miss.

"Tony?" Loki's voice asked from right next to him. When had he moved? "Are you alright? You looked a million miles away just now."

Tony sighed. "Yeah, just thinking—Loki, my money doesn't bother you, does it? I mean, you don't feel like I'm trying to buy you or something, right?"

"Of course you are," Loki said, rolling his eyes. "That's why we've spent months at my place, with the lumpy couch and the twenty seven inch television. I saw yours, by the way. I'm thinking TV weekends need to be moved to your place."

"And it doesn't bother you?" he asked again. He knew Loki had kind of answered, but he had a burning need to hear it, to hear the exact words from Loki's mouth.

Loki seemed to understand, because he smiled. That smile outshone anything in Tony's past. "No, it doesn't bother me that you have money, Tony. I don't love you because of or in spite of your money. The money is what you have, not who you are. I love who you are, and I would feel the same way if you had more, or nothing at all."

And how could Tony want more than that?

\*

Loki was pretty sure he'd fallen for Tony the moment he'd held the car door open for some old woman he didn't even know, just to make her feel good about herself. He'd fallen in love with everything the man had done over the course of their months together, from making breakfast every weekend, to the way he was a furnace to curl up next to on cool evenings, to the way he was an incredible giver in the bedroom.

The fact that Tony couldn't see all of the beautiful things about himself was depressing. It was no wonder he'd ended up in the psych ward, and it was a damn good thing that he had done so before his situation had become dire. Loki hated to imagine his sweet boyfriend getting so low that he killed himself.

Loki's world would be a lesser place without him. He just had to convince Tony that was true.

While Loki was musing on his protectiveness of his lover, Tony was busy in the kitchen. He had made dinner, it seemed. Something with beef, from the delicious smell.

Sauntering up behind where Tony was spooning out bowls of an old fashioned beef stew, Loki wrapped his arms around Tony's solid chest. "How did I get so lucky, hm? Not only a sweet boyfriend who will watch television with me all weekend, but one who can keep me fed at the same time."



Tony chuckled. “You haven’t tried it yet, you never know...”

“You’ve yet to disappoint me in the kitchen,” Loki purred in his ear. “And you know how I feel about food.”

“The way to a man’s heart is through his stomach? Really?” Tony’s voice was jokingly incredulous. “And here I thought the way to your heart was through drinking myself into the hospital.”

Loki smacked his chest and gave his ear a playful nip. “Now Tony, you know I only sleep with patients who have beautiful brown puppy eyes.” He slid his hands lightly down Tony’s chest and pulled him in tight. “But I’m starting to think that the only foolproof way to my heart is through being Tony Stark.”

Tony’s skin flushed pink and warmed under Loki’s hands, and he dropped the spoon in his hands. “You spoil me, you know that?”

“You just wait until after dinner,” Loki whispered in his ear. “I’ll show you spoiling.”

Dinner, of course, was perfect. Loki supposed that Tony’s living by himself in the middle of nowhere required cooking skills. That or a lack of taste buds.

They ignored the dining room altogether, and ate in the enormous living room. It was almost filled with a sectional couch and a television so big that Loki was a little concerned about its stability. He didn’t want that falling down on him.

Tony sat in a corner of the sofa, legs propped up on a footrest that could probably double as a coffee table but for the fact that it was upholstered in the same dark fabric as the sofa itself. Loki sprawled out to take up as much space as possible—as usual. He put his feet across Tony’s lap, though, wanting that contact. It might be Tony’s home, but it was a new place, and that made it mildly uncomfortable.

Seeming to understand Loki’s need to comfort and familiarity, Tony put on a show they’d watched before.

A few dozen ridiculous jokes later, Loki remembered. “The girl’s the killer. Tony Stark, did you play the show that was on the first time we had sex?”

Tony shot him a grin. “Well I figured it seemed to make you happy the first time. Also, anything that gets me into your bed holds a special place in my heart forever.”

Loki pulled a pillow from somewhere behind him on the couch and tossed it at Tony’s head. “We could have been watching Teletubbies and I’d have slept with you that day. I planned it, remember?”

“Do I ever,” Tony answered, setting his bowl on the footrest and climbing over Loki’s legs. “Like you weren’t sexy enough without planning my seduction. Wanna try it again? I promise I’ll be a pliant subject.”

Loki giggled—actually freaking giggled—and set his bowl on the floor. “Why don’t you show me just how pliant, and then we’ll talk.”

\*

Loki woke with a start, not because he was jostled or uncomfortable, but because of the distinct

half-asleep feeling of *not-home*. He smelled cedar wood and lemon-scented floor cleaner. It was nothing like home.

His head was half buried in a pillow, but it seemed that the room was dark. Then two other scents caught his attention. The first was a lingering trace of Tony on the blankets. Aftershave and coconut bodywash—now *that* smelled like home. But there was something else; there was a tiny hint of...

Loki sat straight up in bed. Bacon. He was at Tony's house, and there was bacon.

Jumping out of bed, Loki headed over to where he'd left his bag the night before. He pulled out the neat stack of jeans and t-shirts, then thought better of actually getting dressed, and just tossed a shirt on with his pajama pants. As he pulled the hem down, a glint of gold on the dresser caught his eye.

A gold locket was sitting on the back right corner of the dresser. Odd. It definitely wasn't Tony's; it was far too delicate for Tony's taste. In fact, Tony tended to never wear any kind of jewelry. So why were there four pieces of jewelry sitting on his dresser?

Loki idly picked up the locket, wondering if it had belonged to Tony's mother. There was no picture inside.

A few inches further on, there was a shell bracelet, reminiscent of something a surfer in a television show would wear. Then a diamond ring on a gold chain. A coiled set of beads; Loki guessed it would be some kind of prayer beads—for a Buddhist, maybe? It was odd, the way they were evenly spaced out on the dresser, as though they never moved from those spots, and they were of some importance.

Given Tony's disinterest in jewelry, it was strange. He made a mental note to ask about it later.

He had much more pressing matters to attend in the short term, though. Bacon.

Practically skipping out to join Tony in the kitchen, he was surprised at his own mood. He'd never managed to sleep well in anyone else's home before. Not even when he went to visit his father in his new home. Something about Tony just relaxed him in a way he couldn't define.

Sure enough, Tony was in the kitchen with a pan full of eggs. It looked like some kind of frittata, with spinach and caramelized onions. Tony was in the midst of sprinkling cheese onto it when Loki walked in, and he grinned. "My mother would be scandalized, I've completely bastardized her mother's recipe. But everything is better with cheese."

Chuckling, Loki nodded. "Don't think I don't remember the time you fed me macaroni and cheese with grilled cheese sandwiches."

"Hey, that was a great dinner," Tony protested. "A true culinary masterpiece!"

"You do know your way around a block of cheddar, I'll give you that," Loki agreed amiable. He was always amiable when someone was about to feed him.

"The trick is the swiss, actually." Tony busied himself pulling plates and cups out of cupboards.

"Hey, could you grab silverware? It's in that drawer." He pointed off to his left.

Loki checked a few drawers before finding the right one, and selected the necessary utensils. "So do we have plans for today, or is it just to bask in the glory of your superior air conditioning?"

“Well we could go swimming,” Tony suggested. “I seem to recall whining about how you don’t have a pool.”

“As long as we’re acknowledging that you were the one who was whining,” Loki agreed. “I did bring something to swim in.”

That seemed to inexplicably disappoint Tony. “So no skinny dipping?” He slid the frittata onto a plate and then cut wedges of it to move to smaller serving plates. Then he piled those plates with bacon, so even better.

“After being plied with bacon, you know I’ll give in to almost anything you want,” Loki joked. Skinny dipping was pretty tame, really. It wasn’t like Loki could think of a lot of things Tony would suggest that he *wouldn’t* like. He’d be perfectly happy to curl up together in Tony’s library (the man had a library!) and read all day.

Tony set his plate in front of him. “Then what do bacon and almost-my-grandmother’s-recipe frittata get me?”

“You’ll just have to wait and find out, won’t you?” Loki gave him a coy look that made promises he was more than happy to carry through on.

“And if I add coffee?” Tony grabbed a mug and waved it from of Loki enticingly.

“Well in that case, I’m yours forever,” Loki told him, snatching the cup so fast that the scalding contents almost slopped over the edge onto his hand. Tony’s coffee making skills had improved greatly in the intervening months. “Mmmm, weak and white, just the way I like it.”

Tony chuckled. “Don’t I know it. And then there’s mine,” he said, motioning to his own mug, sitting a few feet away. “Tall, dark, and beautiful.”

Loki rolled his eyes. “Could you be any more ridiculous?”

“Nope. But I’d try, for you.”

Guzzling half of his coffee in one go, Loki sat down in one of the chairs at the island counter. “I’d throw something at you right now, but the only thing I have handy is bacon, and you’d keep it.”

Grabbing a piece of bacon off his own plate, Tony nodded. “Damn right I would. I make awesome bacon.” And he bit off half the slice at once.

After breakfast, they did decide to go swimming. To Tony’s disappointment, they wore swim trunks.

Loki rolled his eyes at the whiny protesting. “I don’t like being naked in chlorinated water. I don’t know why. But if you want me naked, take me to that gorgeous whirlpool tub in your apartment-sized bathroom.”

“Hey, your apartment is at least twice the size of my bathroom!” Tony defended.

“Oh, at least,” Loki agreed, rolling his eyes. “I can’t imagine why I was suggesting that your bathroom was excessively large.”

“I dunno, Loki,” Tony mused, brushing his fingers over his goatee thoughtfully. “I’m just not that impressed with my bathroom. It’s missing something important.”

Sighing, Loki propped his arm up on the pristine white tiles at the edge of the pool. “You’re going to say something ridiculous now, aren’t you?”

“You know what? I figured it out,” Tony announced, ignoring Loki’s comment completely. “My bathroom doesn’t have a Loki living in it. It’s practically a wasteland.”

So Loki splashed a handful of water at his face. When Tony retaliated in kind, it quickly turned into a war of ‘who can splash more water up the other’s nose’. Fifteen seconds later, Loki found himself pressed up against the pool wall, a warm body pushed against every inch of him. He was tempted to make a short joke, but then the intense look Tony was giving him turned his brain into jelly. All he wanted to do was stare right back.

No, that wasn’t true.

He wanted to kiss his boyfriend senseless, until they were both so out of breath that they hardly had the energy to make their way out of the pool. When they finally made it out of the pool, he wanted to be so distracted by Tony, and kissing Tony, that they didn’t even bother drying off, just made out all the way back to Tony’s bedroom, and spent the rest of the morning completely wrapped up in each other.

So they did.

## Trinkets

It was perfect, which always meant that it was almost over. It was the pattern. Tony met someone amazing. They fell in love. He decided he wanted to spend the rest of his life with them. They told him they were done with him.

It wasn't that he wanted to be a pessimist, life had just taught him that pessimism was a way to defend himself from the inevitable misery that was to come. It didn't really help. Everyone always said that they were a pessimist because then they were never disappointed, and that was a load of crap. Just because you expected the worst didn't mean it sucked any less when the universe gave it to you.

He knew Loki would leave, just like everyone else.

This time, though, he was pretty sure it was going to kill him.

Loki was perfect in a way that none of the others had ever been. He wasn't just clever and pretty. He was easy. Spending time with him was never a chore. Loki never dragged him to parties, or demanded that he be more interesting than he was. They were content just reading, or watching television, or... just hanging out together.

They were lying in bed chatting about the ranch, the property it was on, and Tony's views on keeping horses on the property. Apparently Loki liked horses, and had always wanted one. Tony still didn't like the idea of having a stranger on his property to take care of the animals, but for Loki, he'd consider it.

"I can't imagine living on all this land without having animals, though," Loki was saying. "I know that cleaning up after them and feeding them is work, but you don't think it's worth it?"

Tony laughed. "You offering to muck stables, Sweetheart? Cause if so, I'll buy all the horses you want."

Loki drew himself up on his elbow and rested his head in his hand, peering down at Tony. "You really would, wouldn't you?"

"Sure," Tony confirmed. "You want?"

Loki smiled indulgently. "You are something else, Tony Stark."

"So that's a no, right?" Tony turned on his side and threw an arm over Loki's waist. "Cause I don't wanna go buy a half dozen horses and then have you back out on me."

Was that too heavy-handed? He wanted to know if Loki was planning to stay with him, but he doubted he was going to get a definitive answer in a conversation about horses.

Loki laughed. "I think six might be a bit much. And besides, horses need daily care, and I can't drive here every night after work to muck out stables." He stuck his lower lip out in an adorable pout. "So as much as I'd love to say yes, I'm afraid I can't in good conscience say that I'm going to properly take care of six horses. Taking care of one boyfriend takes up most of my free time. And I'd rather have him than all the horses in the world."

Tony grinned and started to open his mouth, but Loki clapped a hand over it.

"No," he growled. "No horse jokes."

It was hard to bite back his laughter, but for Loki's sake, Tony did so. "Okay, but just for you. You can't deny you're a giant, though. Maybe not a frost giant, but you're like seven feet tall."

Loki snorted. "It only seems that way to you because you're a midget."

That was the easy back and forth that made everything between them perfect. Tony had been subjected to height jokes for so long that they seemed pretty irrelevant. Especially when he knew that Loki was quite fond of his height. Something about how it was perfect for when he got down on his knees, and...

That was the moment when Tony's world started to unravel. Loki got a strange thoughtful look on his face, and motioned with his head over to Tony's dresser. "Why do you have a bunch of strange jewelry on your dresser, Tony?"

He almost choked. Oh gods. Not that. Anything but that. Ask him about why he was an awful CEO, about how his parents didn't love him, about what a lazy rich bastard he was...

"I mean," Loki continued. "You never wear any jewelry. And none of it is what I'd call your style anyway."

"It, um. It's just..." Tony desperately searched his brain for an excuse that made it okay.

Too late. Loki's eyes had narrowed, and his head cocked in a way that said he was worried about something. "Oh, Tony. Please tell me they're your mother's."

He was pretty sure just the look on his face gave him away, so he didn't bother trying to obfuscate. He shook his head.

Loki gave a long-suffering sigh, and said, "okay, tell me about it."

"Do I have to?" His voice came out small and pathetic. "I don't want to ruin our weekend."

"And them being there doesn't drag you down a little bit every day?" Loki asked gently. "It doesn't make you sad, being forced to think about things that are better left in the past?"

He didn't understand, not really. If he did, he wouldn't be asking so kindly. He wouldn't be worried about Tony. He'd be running for his car, trying to escape the monster he'd trusted with his heart.

"I don't... It's not... It's just what I have left of them. It's what they left me with," He finished, feeling ridiculous.

Loki looked hurt. Oh no. That was all wrong.

"So you still want to think about them every day?" he asked Tony quietly. "Did you look over my bag, decide what you'd like to keep when I leave?"

The words he wanted to say caught on the lump forming in his throat. He just shook his head violently.

"Well then I should recommend something, shouldn't I?" Loki's voice was tight with restrained emotion. "Maybe the watch my father gave me when I graduated college. You can have it, if your little collection is so important to you."

"No," Tony denied, his voice coming out as a strangled whisper. "It's not that. That's not..."

"Not good enough? How about my high school class ring? It's even red and gold, your favorite colors." Loki was getting himself more and more worked up as he went, and Tony had to do something before things got out of hand. Before Loki left him just because of *their* things.

"I missed them, Loki!" He was far too close to crying for his own comfort. His eyes were stinging with unshed tears. "I was alone, and for a long time, it was all I had to remind me of not being alone."

"And you haven't gotten rid of them because you're still expecting me to leave you," Loki continued. His voice had gone quiet again, and Tony didn't know if that was good or bad.

Tony just hung his head.

It was true, and he wasn't going to deny the truth to Loki. Not even if Loki asked him for truths that he didn't want to give. Suddenly, he was taken with a need to be *away*. Loki was going to leave him like everyone else, and despite it, he didn't want Loki to end up *there*. He didn't ever want that.

He rolled off the bed and grabbed his jeans, pulling them on as he hopped toward the door. He skipped a shirt altogether. Too much time and effort, and he needed to be somewhere else.

"Tony?" Loki called after him.

Zippering up his jeans, Tony just kept walking. Loki said something else behind him, but he couldn't make it out.

He should have known. He had known, really. Everyone always realized that he wasn't worth it. With all those billions of dollars, a giant house on a beautiful property, and a genius level intellect, he still managed to be a disappointment to everyone who tried to love him. His father had been right. He just demanded too damn much from people.

He didn't even have to think about where he was going. It was where he always went when he wanted to think about what a monster he was. The only place where he had loved ones who didn't judge him, didn't tell him he was unlovable, didn't leave him.

Couldn't leave him.

The grove was almost half an hour walk from the main house, through rough and forested terrain. That wheelbarrow he'd considered for the compost bag really wasn't a bad idea. It was about the only kind of device that could make it through the area without having to tear down trees.

Loki would be gone by the time he got back, he was sure. He'd been right to worry. He couldn't even go one day without driving off the man he loved.

*The love of his life.*

He saw that quite clearly, when it was too late.

Loki wasn't anything like the others who had left him. They had all made decisions. They had found something that they cared about more than Tony. Jobs, exploration, free love... They all walked away because they wanted something other than him. Loki was leaving because Tony wasn't worth loving. Because he was the creepy kind of guy who kept his exes' jewelry on his dresser, like some kind of grotesque trophies. A shrine to his ineptitude.

He had always thought of them as tokens. What he had left of his loves. They couldn't really leave him, and there was the proof. Starting with Pepper's locket, it had just seemed like a concrete thing that he could keep to remind himself that even if it hadn't been perfect, someone had loved him.

The grove was, as always, serene. It was covered with a perfect uncut layer of grass, soft and sweet. It looked like a Jackson Pollock painting, with the riot of different flowers he'd planted. The smell of the flowers was overpowered by ripe blackberries—they had been Eric's favorite—and aromatic herbs. He never harvested herbs there. It wasn't that kind of place; they hadn't been planted for him. The lavender was for Pepper, the mint and thyme for Marianne, and the rosemary plant for Whitney. Actually, he'd bought the plant for Whitney himself, but then Whit had decided to leave.

What could he buy for Loki? There were no plants that symbolized Loki for him. Loki didn't belong in the grove, and Tony wasn't going to allow him to become a resident. He couldn't. Unlike everyone else who had ever left him, there was something comforting in the idea that Loki was eternal, whether he was saddled with Tony or not.

Flopping down onto his back near Pepper, he sighed and stared at the sky. "Really screwed it up this time, Pep," he told her. Turning his head to one side, he plucked a single blade of grass and watched it wave in the breeze. "I know I always say that, but it's true this time. I finally found him, and I fucked it up."

He let go of the grass and it blew off toward the house. His eyes tracked it as he continued. "He's nothing like any of you. He wasn't using me for anything. He wasn't walking away from me. And I ruined it, because I couldn't let go of you guys. What the hell is wrong with me?"

If Pepper could answer him, he was sure there would be a few choice words about his self-involvement, and maybe more importantly, his sanity. She never let him get away with anything.

For just a second, when he heard the intake of breath, he imagined that it was Pepper, preparing to lay into him for all the stupid shit he'd done. It had been so long that he wasn't sure he remembered her voice anymore. It wasn't Pepper, though. He was crazy, but he wasn't completely unhinged. Pepper was dead, she couldn't talk to him.

He turned his head to find Loki standing on the edge of the clearing, wearing his pajama pants and one of Tony's t-shirts. His mouth was hanging open, and there was fear in his eyes.

Loki was in the grove. Loki didn't belong in the grove, dead or alive. He wasn't supposed to see that. He wasn't supposed to...

\*

"...nothing like any of you. He wasn't using me for anything. He wasn't walking away from me. And I ruined it, because I couldn't let go of you guys. What the hell is wrong with me?" Tony's voice slowly became comprehensible as Loki drew closer to it.

He hated that he'd started a conversation that Tony clearly wasn't ready for, and that it had caused



his poor sweet lover so much trauma that he had actually fled the house. He had to get to Tony, to fix it. He didn't want what they had to end, much less over one stupid argument.

Loki cleared the tree line quite suddenly and found himself in a beautiful clearing that was full of plants and flowers.

For a moment, all Loki could do was gape, his mouth opening and closing like a fish. It couldn't be what it looked like, could it? The clearing was like a nightmare where everything looked perfect and beautiful, but decay and horror were hiding just under the surface. The sweet-smelling floral facade was going to crack apart at any moment, revealing something unspeakable beneath.

His heart rebelled as his brain started making connections.

Four.

*No. You don't have to think about this. Go back to the house and pretend it never happened.*

Four pieces of jewelry.

*He's perfect. He loves you. It was just one tiny fight, almost not even a fight.*

Four clearly delineated plots of land in a perfect semicircle.

*Stop this. Stop it now. You love him. He's become your whole world, and you're going to ruin it.*

Four graves.

*Who cares? It's not you! He'd never do this to you!*

Would he?

Loki could pinpoint the exact moment that the adrenaline hit his bloodstream. The tang of copper hit the back of his throat, his heart started pounding, and the blood was rushing in his ears so loudly that he didn't hear what Tony said. He definitely said something, though. Every muscle in Loki's body wanted to tense, to run away, or to lash out against whatever threat there was.

But there was only Tony.

Tony, who was looking terrified and saying, "Loki?"

No wonder Loki hadn't heard him the first time, he was practically whispering.

He hated himself a little for the easy way he slipped into Nurse Loki. "Tony, why don't we go back to the house and talk?"

"Talk?" Tony asked, in his tiny voice.

"Of course, talk," he sighed. "What did you think was going to happen? That I'd just be gone when you got back?"

Tony gave him a disbelieving look, but played along. Loki was almost certain that they both knew exactly what was happening. He wondered what Tony expected when they got back to the house. A fight? Did he want to add Loki to his... collection? He had to repress a shudder at the idea.

What had Tony been talking about when he'd arrived? That Loki hadn't been using him—*nothing like any of you*. Loki was well aware the emotional instability was, well, unstable, but that hadn't

sounded like a man planning his next murder. He'd sounded despondent. More suicidal than homicidal.

Somehow, that hurt worse.

*He 's still Tony. You still love him.*

But Tony had killed people. At least four of them. It was impossible to imagine, but Loki's brain started dredging up scenarios. Did he have a gun? Did he drug them and bury them alive, so they wouldn't be dead the last time he saw them? That seemed to fit Tony's abandonment issues.

And suddenly Loki had to know.

They walked in silence for the full half hour, Loki trying to figure out what to do, and... well, he supposed that Tony was doing the same thing. Would Tony try to kill him? Would he try to convince him he hadn't seen what he saw?

When they reached the drive, Loki stumbled. "I think I cut my foot," he said absently, stepping a bit hesitantly.

Tony, ever the attentive boyfriend, frowned as though he was in pain. "Do you need help?"

"No, I'll make it. Just need to get to the bathroom to clean it up and bandage it." He limped his way into the house, making a point of not putting his foot down on Tony's beautiful hardwood floors.

Tony followed, and when they arrived in the bedroom, he pressed ahead into the bathroom to look for supplies. Loki closed the door and held it tightly. Yes. That was better.

"Loki?" Tony's pained voice came from the other side of the door.

"I'm sorry, Tony," he answered. "I need for us to talk, but I needed to feel safe, too. Can you understand that?"

Loki's heart clenched painfully when he heard a snuffle. It was followed by a whispered, "yes, Loki. I understand."

"Will you tell me the truth?" It was probably a stupid question to ask a murderer, and if Tony had been a patient, Loki wouldn't have dreamed of trusting his answer. He had to know, though. The largest part of him still wanted to trust Tony, at least with the truth.

There was a long moment of quiet then, and a flat white packet was pushed under the door. A bandage. There was a thump on the door that startled him, but then he realized that it was just Tony lowering himself to sit against it. "I'll tell you whatever you want to know, Loki."

Keeping a firm hold on the doorknob despite the fact that Tony hadn't so much as jiggled it, Loki took a deep breath. "Tell me about the graves."

"Grove," Tony corrected. "I call it the grove."

An apt name, even if it was something of a disturbing almost-play-on-words. "But you've buried people there?"

"Yes. Four of them. But you know that." Tony answered simply, and that sounded like the unvarnished truth.

Loki released a breath and leaned on the doorjam. "The people who left you."

"Not exactly," Tony denied. "Well, yes. I'm crazy, but I'm not stupid. They were leaving me. I..." he broke off suddenly, and the door bounced in rhythm with a sudden series of sobs. "I couldn't let them leave me, Loki."

"And now they can't," Loki surmised. "The jewelry. Trophies?"

"No!" There was a sharp rap on the door that Loki thought was Tony hitting it, then he heard a quiet "ouch", and he realized Tony had accidentally hit his head.

He hated himself for wanting to open the door and offer comfort.

"I don't know—" Tony sighed on the other side of the door. "I just don't know, Loki. I think it was an accident, the first time."

Loki had to remind himself to exercise caution at that. He could easily forgive one accidental death, but the three after that? "You don't know if it was an accident?"

"Sh-she left me. Months before it happened. She came back one night, drunk and demanding sex. I-I don't really know what I was thinking. It just... happened."

In textbooks and popular media, sociopaths were calm and unperturbed by their crimes. They certainly didn't tend to start crying when talking about them, unless it was for show. Tony was definitely sobbing.

Of course, that was the thing about sociopaths. They were also supposed to be excellent actors.

Tony... was definitely neither of those things. Loki watched himself let go of the door handle as he slid down to sit on the opposite side of the wooden barrier.

"And the next one?" he asked.

"Eric," Tony agreed. "Found him camping on my property. Invited him home."

Loki felt hope drain out of him. "And killed him."

"I didn't just invite him back and kill him," Tony protested. "He, he moved in. He'd dropped out of college, been roughing it since his family had tossed him out. He moved in with me, stayed for almost a year."

"And then he tried to leave you," Loki breathed, truly beginning to understand. "He moved in, you fell in love, and then he wanted to leave you."

The door shook with Tony's sobs. "Just like Pepper. They always leave."

"The girl you drank yourself unconscious for right before we met?" Loki was almost afraid to ask, but he had to know. "Is she..."

"The daisies," Tony said in confirmation. "She loved daisies. And the Mala beads, those were hers."

"And what are you planning for my grave, Tony?" Loki's morbid curiosity was really getting the better of him.

Tony sighed. "Nothing. I know you won't believe me, but I... I can't."

"Can't kill me and plant me in your garden with the others?" He was pretty sure his bitterness was apparent in his tone, but he couldn't bring himself to care. Dammit, Tony was supposed to be *it*. He was supposed to be the one Loki spent the rest of his life with, not the one who killed him and added him to his morbid collection of dead lovers.

"No," Tony agreed. "If you want to go, I—" he broke off in a choked sob before continuing "I won't try to stop you. I *won't* hurt you. You don't belong with them."

"Because I didn't leave you," Loki surmised.

There was a long silence that Loki was about to take for confirmation, then the whisper came through the door. "Because I love you more. Gods, Loki, I'm a monster. I never loved them at all. I thought I did, but if I'd loved them, I couldn't have killed them. I *couldn't* have."

Heaven help him, Loki's heart broke. "And if I let you out, and tell you I'm going to the police?"

"Do you want me to go with you?" Tony asked, sounding resigned.

"Are you offering to confess?" Even knowing what he knew, that idea shocked Loki.

Tony didn't even hesitate. "If you want me to, Loki."

"I wish I knew what I wanted," he answered truthfully.

Loki's father always seemed to have the easy, *morally correct* answer. His parents had spent a decade protesting all the world's wrongs, and it seemed obvious that Tony was just such a wrong. He had killed four people, buried them on his property, and even confessed to the killings. No reason for killing a person could ever be good enough. Taking a life was the most morally reprehensible act a human being could commit.

So why was Loki's heart screaming at him to forgive Tony? To let it go, to forget it had ever happened?

Even with the urge, he knew they couldn't do that. They couldn't erase the afternoon, and pretend that Loki didn't know the truth. And every time—

"How did you kill them?" he asked, wanting to know what he would be waiting for.

The sobbing intensified for a long moment before the hoarse voice came through. "Choked them. I choked them."

That didn't sound right. "They didn't fight? You didn't look any worse for wear when you came into the ward."

Oh gods, the ward. How little Loki had understood then that Tony belonged there more than anyone. Of course, if Loki turned him in, he'd never end up in the ward, or any hospital. Like almost every high profile mentally ill murderer Loki could think of, Tony's insanity plea would be ignored, and he would end up in prison, where he'd likely be murdered. Loki shuddered.

"Please don't, Loki..."

"Did you drug them?" Loki pressed on, ignoring Tony's unease.

Between the shaking sobs that followed, the only word that came out intelligibly was 'sex'.

Well that was certainly one way to distract the person you were about to murder. And Tony was

just that damned good in bed, that a selfish bastard who was leaving him would want one last tumble. Why did his brain keep rewinding to the same spot over and over again, where it said that poor Tony had been ill-used by horrible people?

Tony was a killer.

Tony was a killer, whom Loki was still completely in love with.

"I need time to think," he announced without warning. "I'm going to go back to my apartment, to think."

Tony's voice sounded defeated. "Do you want me to—"

"I don't want you to do anything right now." Loki shook his head as though Tony could see that through the door. "I just need time to think. I'm going to leave now."

"Loki?" the small voice was barely audible through the door.

He stood slowly, stretching his legs. "Yes?"

"I love you."

"I love you too, Tony."

Gods, how he wished he didn't.

## **If You're Gone**

Of all the horrible possibilities for the way their weekend together would end, Tony had not expected discovery.

None of the others had ever so much as suspected, that he was aware. Marianne had been fascinated by Whitney's mother's engagement ring. He'd caught her playing with it more than once. But until Loki, that had been the most contact any of them had with any other. Each was—usually long—dead by the time the next had come into his life.

None of them had known each other, and none of them had known about each other. And now Loki knew about all of them.

He sat in the bathroom, huddled into a ball with his knees to his chin, listening as Loki put his clothes away. He heard keys jingle, and then movement stopped.

For a moment Tony assumed that Loki had left, but then the soft words drifted through the door, "Please don't do anything drastic, Tony. I just... need time to process all of this. I'll call you."

Then the bedroom door opened and closed.

For a long time, Tony couldn't move.

Loki was gone. He'd been kind enough to leave Tony with hope, but that hope felt like a soap bubble. It was beautiful, but if he examined it too closely, he'd be left with nothing at all. Because in all seriousness, Tony might be crazy, but Loki wasn't. The sensible thing for Loki to do would be get as far away from the ranch as possible, and then call the police.

One of the things Tony loved most about Loki was how sensible he was.

Tony wasn't sure how long he sat there against the wall, but eventually he fell asleep in that upright fetal position.

He dreamed, and it started as the same dream he'd had the night that Loki had given him the sleeping pill. It was vivid, colorful, and painful.

Loki was lying on a bed of red satin, his pristine Snow-White-esque features even more dramatic than they were in waking hours. Long, glossy black hair—the hair that refused to stay up—splayed like a halo across the crimson pillow. His skin, always so pale, was translucent and almost waxen, and Tony could see the deep blue veins under it. Around his throat was a grotesque purple ring of hand prints. Tony's hand prints.

When Tony reached down to touch, he found Loki's skin cold and clammy, with no pulse running beneath his skin. Loki was dead, and Tony had killed him. He would never see those green eyes sparkle with mischief again. Never hear that deep throaty laugh when he made a stupid joke.

Loki was gone forever, and it was his fault.

"You weren't this bothered when it was me," said an annoyed voice behind him.

He nodded. "I know. I'm sorry, Pep."

"Really loved this one, huh?" she asked, her voice back to its usual clinical efficiency. Tony should

have known it would never work between them. She was too professional, too staid. He must have driven her nuts.

He sat down on the horrible satin-covered bed, nodding again. "He was perfect, Pepper. Perfect, and I fucked it up."

She looked down at him for a moment, then shrugged. "You always do. You couldn't handle your father's distance, or your job as CEO, or your relationship with me. Maybe you're just supposed to be alone, Tony."

"But I don't want to be alone. I want Loki back." It sounded petulant and obnoxious, but it was true. Loki was gone forever, it was his fault, and all he wanted was to have his boyfriend back.

"Should have thought of that before you killed him," Pepper said, sitting down next to Tony and crossing her ankles demurely. "Guess you're going to have to plant him with the rest of us, huh? You know, Tony, I'm thinking it's time you start seriously considering suicide. I mean, you can't go on like this. Killing people you claim to love? It's sick."

He clasped Loki's hand tighter as his brain both protested and agreed with her comment. "I didn't mean to. I didn't want to hurt him!"

"Yes, well you did." Pepper was merciless. "And if you can't even keep yourself from killing him, you're a danger to everyone, Tony."

"This is wrong," he said, dropping Loki's hand and pulling away. "This isn't happening. I didn't kill Loki. I would never kill Loki. I love him. I let him go!"

Pepper smiled, and there were too many teeth in it. "So you did, and boy did he go. Do you think you'll ever see him again, other than in a courtroom pointing at you and saying 'yes, your honor, that's him'?" The walls started to melt, and Pepper just laughed. "This is going to be great, Tony. You're finally going to get what you deserve, and it's going to happen because you actually fell in love."

Tony turned to look at Loki's body on the bed, and it was staring at him with empty eyes. "He's the one," it said. "He's a murderer. No one ever loved him, so he killed us all."

He leapt back with a very unmanly scream, only to wake when his head hit something hard. He was lying on the floor in the bathroom, the door still firmly closed behind his back. There was no light shining through the bathroom's skylight, just a hint of stars that was obscured by his own reflection on the glass.

For almost a decade, his habit when stressed had been to go to the grove. He'd spent more time there than anywhere else. He'd slept there once or twice when he was especially lonely. It was his safe place. It was where the people who had loved him were, and they could never leave there, leave him.

The thought of going to the grove turned his stomach.

Pepper had never loved him. If she'd loved him, she wouldn't have left him alone. The others were no different. He had selfishly tried to keep them, when the truth was that not one of them had loved him. Some of them might have cared for a while. Some of them had used him for his money, or affection, or other reasons, but none of them had ever been like Loki.

No one else in the world was like Loki.

Peeling his jeans off, he turned the shower on as hot as it would go, and climbed in. Absently, he wondered if Loki had actually hurt his foot. Probably not. It had been a ruse to get them into separate rooms. Loki was so clever.

His chest was covered with sweat and thick layer of grime from the extended period outside while shirtless. His hair still stank of chlorine. The shower spray stung where it hit his skin, so he grabbed a washcloth and started scrubbing.

He wondered where Loki was. Back in San Francisco already, surely. At a police station, telling them everything he knew about Tony, and about his victims? At home, trying to clean himself of the layer of filth that being around Tony had left on his skin? Had he been distracted while driving, and been in an accident? Was he dying by the side of the road because of Tony?

Every fiber of his being longed to call, to make sure that Loki was okay. He just wanted to hear his voice, even if it was filled with disgust for Tony and what he was. He didn't care what part of himself Loki was willing to give, he wanted it. Any scrap that Loki would spare him, for as long as he was willing.

Loki wasn't the one who was going to die without Tony.

There was a tall oak tree at the north end of the grove. So many sturdy branches. They hardly swayed in the California breezes; not even the strongest spring rainstorm shook that tree. Tony wanted its strength. It could support him.

Loki's parting words drifted through his mind. *Please don't do anything drastic, Tony.*

How well Loki knew him. He had promised to call too, though. He had said he loved Tony, even after he knew everything. How was that possible? No one else had ever loved him. How could Loki, who knew him so completely?

He had promised to call.

Tony had locked himself in the bathroom, where his phone was not, when Loki was going to call him. What if he had missed it? What if Loki had wanted to talk, and he had missed his chance?

Turning off the water, Tony scrambled out of the shower, barely pausing long enough to grab a towel to wrap around his hips.

His phone was sitting on the bedside table, right where he'd left it the night before. He scrubbed his hands across the towel to dry them before picking up the device—he wasn't going to risk ruining it and losing any message Loki might have left.

When he flipped it on, it showed one missed text message. One missed text message from Loki. Heart pounding in his chest, he unlocked the phone and went to his messages.

*Arrived home safe, thought you 'd want to know.*

A coil of tension in Tony's gut loosened a bit. Loki wasn't bleeding out on the side of the road somewhere.

He checked the time: almost ten o'clock exactly. Not too late to respond. Should he respond? Maybe the better question was whether he would be able to stop himself, and the answer to that question was a resounding no.

*Thank you for letting me know. I love you. Good night.*



That worked, right? Short, to the point, not demanding any kind of response. Not for the first time, he wished that his imaginary Pepper could actually give him advice. Not that she would have been thrilled with the idea of helping Tony conquer his neuroses.

It was just a few minutes later—eight, he counted them while watching his phone—when Loki answered.

*I love you. Good night.*

Tony read the message again and again. I love you. Loki still loved him. He wouldn't lie about that, would he? What reason was there, when he was safely away from Tony?

Still clutching his phone tightly, Tony padded back into the bathroom. He scrubbed another towel through his hair to take out the excess water, then hung both up to dry.

He opened the top drawer of his dresser for a clean pair of boxers and pulled them on, still managing not to put the phone down. The talismans there caught his eye. Pepper's locket. Eric's bracelet. Whitney's mother's engagement ring. Marianne's prayer beads. They were the reminders he had kept. He had thought them a reclamation, at first, a way of keeping his lovers with him. They had slowly become symbols—proof that someone had loved him. That there must be a part of him worth loving.

He didn't know what they were anymore.

Proof that he was a monster who had murdered people because he didn't know how else to keep them?

He was pretty sure that social awkwardness wasn't the sort of defense that held up in court. They hadn't bought the twinkie bullshit from that asshole who had murdered Harvey Milk. It wasn't that it was an inherently bad defense. It was just that there was no defense good enough for murdering innocent people. All of the excuses in the world couldn't replace a stolen life.

He started toward the bed, and the tiny trashcan he kept there caught his eye. No. Not that. That was disrespectful. The only thing he could still give them was respect, so he would give it to them. He left them. He would deal with it in the morning.

Wandering back over to the bed, he flopped down on the side where Loki had slept just the night before. It still smelled like him. He curled up and buried his face in the pillow, phone still clutched in his right hand. He wasn't a religious guy, but he hoped for a dreamless sleep, even if he knew he didn't deserve it.

He dreamed.

\*

*I love you. Good night.*

He felt like there must be something wrong with him as he typed out the response to Tony's text. It was true, though, and he didn't want Tony to think otherwise. Not only would it feed into Tony's issues and increase the probability of him doing something stupid, Loki didn't want to feel like he was giving up.

The man he loved was a killer, and Loki himself was the most—probably the only—likely next target. Why wasn't he afraid?

He had been at first. Realizing that Tony was a killer, seeing the graves—the grove?—made him assume Tony wasn't the man he had presented himself as for nearly six months. He had been wrong, though. Tony was exactly the man he'd shown Loki during their time together. Sweet, kind, loving, incredibly intelligent, and terrified of being left alone.

*On some level*, the professional in his head told him, *he killed those people so that he could be with them forever*. Not because he wanted to hurt anyone, or because he got any enjoyment from the act itself—it seemed quite the opposite, from his reaction to the situation. Loki didn't doubt at all that Tony's reactions had been anything but genuine.

He was the kind of person who needed a hospital. Jail time would do nothing to help him, unless the state thought that help was letting him find a way to kill himself. And that was only if the collection of murderers in prison didn't help him with that first.

The first conclusion Loki came to, before he even got home that night, was that he wasn't going to turn Tony in.

It would have damned him in the eyes of many, he was sure, but they could go screw themselves. He knew he was making himself an accessory after the fact, and that he could face his own jail time for it. He worried about the ramifications of his decision, but he couldn't bring himself to feel bad about it. Tony wasn't a danger to anyone but him, and he was willing to accept that risk.

For the rest of the weekend, he sat around in his pajamas eating ice cream straight out of the carton. Moose tracks, rocky road, and vanilla bean gelato, he finished them all. He ordered a pizza once. The pizza man had flirted and he'd had no inclination to deal with it, tipping the man and sending him on his way. Why did people always flirt when you had no interest in flirting back? Were they like cats, who sensed that the people who wouldn't meet their eyes were safe?

He also sporadically texted Tony over the weekend.

It started with the innocent wish to make sure Tony wasn't worried about him. But it wasn't really innocent at all. He missed Tony. He wanted that contact, even if it felt like it wasn't nearly enough. He tried to make a point of not texting anything that sounded like an invitation, since he knew that Tony would be in a car and on his way before Loki could even explain that he still needed to be alone for a while.

He knew that Tony understood his need, but he also knew that what Tony needed was the opposite. He felt guilty about that, but he *really* needed time and distance, and for once, that trumped what Tony needed.

Friday night when he finished eating his pizza, he picked up his phone.

*Did you eat dinner?*

Less than a minute later, there was a response. It made his heart twist, knowing that Tony was keeping the phone with him, just waiting for Loki to call.

*I forgot. You?*

Loki sighed. He wasn't going to properly take care of himself without prodding.

*Yes, I ate. Go to the kitchen and re-heat some stew. You need to eat.*

Once again, it was less than a minute before Tony responded.

*Okay, Loki. I love you.*

Poor dear. Loki was taken by the urge to drive back out and comfort him. That was a terrible idea, though. He still had so much to process. He wasn't ready to commit to a decision. Part of him was angry with Tony for not being perfect, but he knew that was pure selfishness. He did very much wish that Tony was imperfect in a slightly less enormous way, though.

He responded in the only way he could.

*I love you, Tony.*

By the time Tuesday came, he was still feeling slightly numb. He considered calling in sick, but he couldn't do that to Jaime. He'd already taken an extra day off. The normalcy of routine would probably help him, too, even if he didn't feel particularly inspired to help a bunch of strangers.

The only person he really wanted to help right then was himself. Okay, and Tony. He only wished there was something he could do to take Tony's past away from him.

Lorelei didn't help. The second he walked in the door, she gave him a sly smile. "Surprised to see you're not walking funny today, Romeo."

He rolled his eyes. "That's a complete myth, and you know it. Unless the sex was incredibly rough, there's no logical reason my gait would be altered by it."

"Wow, you're a downer," she said, grinning. "Juliet not give good head this weekend?"

"Tony is an exceptionally skilled man. Could we refrain from making Romeo and Juliet jokes about my boyfriend with a history of possibly suicidal depression?" He winced after he said it, knowing it would lead to a flurry of apologies and remind them both of their ugly teenage years.

Sure enough, when he turned to look at her, she was biting her lip, and there were tears in her eyes. "Sorry, Loki. I wasn't thinking about it like that. I just—"

"No, Lorelei, it's my fault. *I didn't* have the weekend I wanted to, and I'm taking it out on you. I'm sorry." He put an arm around her shoulder, and she leaned on him.

"I still miss her," she whispered.

Squeezing her shoulder, all he could say was, "Me too."

Jaime, saint that he was, didn't say a word about it when he walked into the office and found them like that. What he did was grab an empty file folder and look up at them. "I'm going to need you for a consult today, Loki." He didn't look happy about it.

Loki decided that meant they needed to have a talk before the consult in question.

It didn't take long to corner Jaime in his office. He closed the door behind himself and flopped down in a chair. "Tell me about it."

Jaime looked like someone had run over his dog. “Her parents are major hospital donors.”

“And you think it’s going to be a bad one?” Loki asked.

“Have you been watching the news?” Jaime was fidgeting, shuffling papers on his desk. Definitely not a good sign.

“Yes,” Loki said. He tried to break some of the tension. “That justice Roberts is a jackass, isn’t he?”

Jaime snorted. “The vehicular homicide at the nightclub last week. We have to talk to her and give a second opinion on her mental state. Or rather, I have to give the opinion in court, but I want you with me for the consult. I don’t want any impression that I’ve handled this wrong.”

Loki nodded in understanding. “You think her parents brought her here assuming that their money means you’ll give the opinion they want.”

“Of course they did,” Jaime said, rolling his eyes. “And the hospital won’t be thrilled if my professional opinion isn’t what the mother wants. But I can’t lie about it. And I need someone to back me up if it comes to it.”

“You think we’re going to get fired for this?” Loki asked, knowing that while it was illegal, it was a real possibility. “You’re a head of department. The whole board would have to vote to get rid of you.”

“Two thirds of the board,” Jaime corrected. “And while I don’t necessarily expect it, I don’t want to take chances.”

Loki shrugged. “You know I’m behind you, Jaime. Anything you need.”

So on his first day back to work after finding out his boyfriend had killed four people, Loki found himself in a consultation with a murderess. He was a little worried that he was going to be biased in her favor, given his situation. For Jaime, he would do his best to stay impartial.

It didn’t take long to realize that impartiality didn’t come into it.

The girl had killed three innocent bystanders in an attempt to hit her ex-boyfriend’s new girlfriend with her car just days earlier, and she was sitting in their consultation room laughing and flirting with the orderly. The poor kid looked deeply uncomfortable, and was visibly happy to see Loki and Jaime.

She looked over at them when they came in, and gave Loki a twice-over that made him feel like he needed a bath. “So you guys are the ones who are going to get me out of this crap?”

“We are here to interview you in regard to the incident on Friday night,” Jaime corrected gently. “I’m Doctor Mendez, and this is my PMHNP, Loki. Are you comfortable having this interview with the two of us?”

She gave Loki a grin and nodded. “I’m definitely okay with that.” Then she winked at him. Like there was any chance he would be interested in a woman at all, let alone one who thought that using her car as a weapon was a good idea. She’d killed two teenage girls and a bouncer who had been trying to shove people out of the way, and she was acting like it was an inconvenience.

It was just possible that it was a very good cover for fear and guilt, but something about the whole situation felt wrong to Loki. It was like the deaths were the unimportant part of the conversation.

Jaime smiled at her and took a seat. She wouldn't know it, but tension in the Doctor's shoulders had just tripled. Unless she was putting on some kind of brave front, he probably wasn't going to be able to give the answer the hospital wanted. Fortunately, they were good at getting through brave fronts, if that was the case.

"Are you ready, then?" Jaime asked, his tone coolly efficient. Loki made a mental note of the attitude, and decided it was the right one. The girl was going to act like it was a joke, so the only way to handle it was to stay professional. Not that staying professional was a bad idea, Loki just usually preferred a friendlier demeanor with people who were going through difficult times.

"Sure," she said. "What do you want me to say?"

Jaime paused at the implication that he was supposed to coach her. "Why don't we start with why you did what you did?"

"I was driving to the club, but then I saw that whore that stole my boyfriend waiting to get in." She made a face as she said the words, and something about it bothered Loki. Not about the face as such, but about the way it didn't match the look in her eyes.

"And that was the reason that you drove your car into a group of people?" Jaime asked, his tone as even and calm as Loki thought possible, under the circumstances.

"She was standing there laughing with her friends like she didn't even care," She pouted, acting as though Jaime's logic was flawed.

Jaime paused for a moment, making a quick note on a notepad before continuing. "So you were only trying to harm one of the people in the crowd?"

She seemed to realize that the interview wasn't going exactly how she'd planned it and backtracked. "I didn't know what I was doing until it was done."

"And the people who died?" Jaime asked. "Did you know them?"

"Know who?" she asked, deadpan.

An hour later, Loki followed Jaime back to his office and once again collapsed into the extra chair.

Jaime squeezed his shoulder as he walked by to sit behind the desk. "Take it out of you, don't they?"

"She had no notion it was important that other people had suffered for her actions." Loki had worked with hundreds of mental patients with every kind of problem under the sun, but he'd never been so disturbed by any of them. Tony's actions had terrified him to his core, but there had been no apathy there. "She didn't care at all."

"No," Jaime agreed. "Textbook sociopathy. The way she realized we were taken aback, and changed tracks immediately. The way she didn't understand what the real issue was. The way she fixated on how it affected her. If she was ten years older, she'd be better at covering it, but she's young."

Predictably, Loki's mind played back to Tony, sobbing on the other side of the door, not even able to articulate what he had done. And then there was the sixteen year old girl who had killed three people, and didn't even care enough to learn their names. She was probably going to get away with an involuntary manslaughter plea and no prison time.

She didn't even know their names. All she wanted was the easiest way out of the horrible mess she'd made.

Meanwhile, Tony was probably sitting in his grove, hating himself.

It was possible that a doctor like Jaime would diagnose the two of them in exactly the same way. There were similar symptoms, certainly. But Loki was sure bias wasn't the only reason he wasn't able to think of them as the same.

"Go call your boyfriend, Loki," Jaime told him. "I know I'm going to call my wife and tell her that I love her."

Loki nodded and headed for the break room. He wasn't sure he wanted to talk to Tony, but...

*I love you*, he texted.

A moment passed, and Loki thought that maybe Tony had finally put the phone down, or fallen asleep, or oh, gods...

After what felt like forever, Tony answered. *I love you. Everything okay? Need help?*

Loki took a deep breath and let it out, calming himself. Until he had another serious talk with Tony, he was going to worry. But was he ready for that? Not yet, he decided. Soon, but not yet.

Careful to avoid saying anything incriminating in text, Loki settled on the simple truth: *Everything is fine. I'm still thinking, but I miss you.*

## What I Need

Tony turned his thirtieth lap of the day in the pool. The chlorine was starting to burn his eyes and his muscles were aching with exertion, but he couldn't seem to stop. Every time he tagged the wall, he just turned right back around for another lap.

His stomach was vibrating with irritation, probably because he'd finished the leftover stew on Sunday and not bothered making anything else substantial since. He'd eaten a handful of baby carrots that morning, and some bread with peanut butter the night before, but eating and keeping it down was proving complicated. He wasn't good at eating under mental strain.

He missed Loki. He hated himself. He hated suspense. Would the police be showing up any moment? The nice young men in their clean white coats? He couldn't say he'd be happy to see them.

It might be a relief, though. Living with what he'd done had always been hard, but living *with* it, and *without* Loki? That was a situation that was quickly becoming untenable.

The only reason he'd managed to get himself into the pool was because he knew Loki was at work, and didn't carry his cell phone on him while he was working. Every other waking minute of the day, the damned thing was clutched in his hand or lying on his chest, even while it was charging. Every word Loki sent him was like manna from heaven. Every word meant that Loki was still a part of his life.

There had to be a way to fix it. He couldn't go back and not kill people, but there had to be a way to make sure that Loki wasn't gone forever.

The problem was that Tony didn't actually know what Loki was thinking. Was he afraid for his life? Was he angry that Tony was a monster? Was he angry that Tony hadn't been more forthcoming? Was he still considering turning Tony in? If Tony knew what he wanted, he would give it to him in a heartbeat. He had never wanted anything more than he wanted Loki to be happy.

But what if Loki was happy without him? Was Loki happy without him? Of course, sometimes Loki initiated the text messages. Those were the times that gave Tony hope.

By the time Tony actually managed to pull himself out of the pool, he was barely able to breathe. He stretched out on his back, gasping like a fish on the tiled floor and wondering if he was going to die. He didn't, obviously, but it definitely reminded him that he needed to try to eat. And drink. His mouth was as dry as the Sahara, and tasted like something had died in there, despite the fact that he had brushed his teeth hours before.

He didn't bother changing into real clothes, just washed the chlorinated water off in the poolside shower and tracked the clean water into the rest of the house. The hardwood floors were waxed, they'd be fine.

The kitchen was perfect, as always. He had a guy who came out twice a month with groceries (who arrived and left under Tony's supervision), so he was fully stocked. It was just that it all looked perfectly awful. He grabbed another carrot stick and forced it down, but he knew that he needed something with more protein and carbohydrates than that. The bread and peanut butter the night before had tried to come back up, though, so he didn't want to try that again.

Part of him wanted to call Loki and ask him what to eat, but that was probably just born of the wish to hear Loki's voice. Also, it was pathetic. He was a grown man. He had been deciding what to eat on his own for more than ten years. If he needed help with that, then he was in a whole lot more trouble than even he knew.

Grabbing another carrot stick, he wandered back to the bedroom. He peeled off his trunks and hung them over the edge of the whirlpool to dry. He went to his dresser to pull out a pair of boxers—pretty much all he'd been wearing for almost a week—and his eyes caught on *them*.

They were what the argument had been about. Why he'd run, and Loki had followed, and everything had been wrenched out into the harsh light of day, like bugs scrambling to find hiding places when someone overturned their rock. It wasn't their fault. They were inanimate objects incapable of fault. But the fact that Tony had kept them was a problem.

A notion started to take root in his mind. It was a stupid idea, but it was all he had.

Heading down to the office that he rarely used, he started rooting through his desk drawers until he found what he was looking for: a large envelope. He sat down at the desk and grabbed a piece of paper and a pen.

Loki,

I'm sure you don't want to hear from me, but I have to do this. I have to do something. I still don't know how to be the man you wanted me to be, a man worthy of you, but I know that it won't include these. It seemed wrong to throw them away, and I thought you would know what to do better than me.

I love you. I miss you. I wish you were here.

Then he painstakingly addressed the envelope to Loki, and went to his bedroom.

He had expected it to be painful, putting them into the envelope, seeing them for what he assumed would be the last time. Instead, it felt right. The tightness in his chest eased with each item slipping out of view forever. They were things, not people, and the people who had owned them were gone. The things had no meaning left for Tony, other than as things that bothered Loki.

He considered not sending it; going out and burying it in the grove instead. Would Loki really appreciate getting such a morbid package in the mail, or would he be horrified? He could probably take them to the police as proof of Tony's crimes. If Loki wanted him in prison, though, he didn't need proof. Tony would just confess.

He didn't want to write that in the letter, of course. What if it fell into the wrong hands?

Scratching absently at his itchy shoulder—all of him was so itchy—he looked at the envelope with trepidation.



In the end, he decided to send it.

\*

It was one of the longest work weeks of Loki's life. Three whole days, and it felt like eternity. He texted with Tony, but that became more and more worrisome. As the week went on, Tony became less and less coherent. When he'd asked if Tony had eaten on Wednesday night, the response had been "*out of carrot sticks.*"

He was sure that had made sense in Tony's mind, but he wasn't sure what it had to do with whether he had eaten anything. Was he only eating carrots? Loki had an image of showing up and finding a bright yellow Tony, so full of beta carotene that it was bleeding into his skin.

It was a better image than the usual ones, though. Tony, having done something awful, but never to anyone but himself.

He had nightmares of Amora, lying in a bathtub of pink water, empty staring eyes pointed at the mildew-stained ceiling of her family's bathroom. She had locked the door, and Lorelei had been pounding on it, demanding that Amora stop being a selfish hag and let someone else have a chance.

It had taken Lorelei years to get over the notion that her name calling might have been the last words her sister heard. It wasn't true; Amora had taken her life in the middle of the night. She hadn't wanted anyone to stop her. Logic doesn't stop guilt, though.

How would Loki live with it if Tony hurt himself? It wasn't as though there would be any doubt why he did it.

The package was the last straw. He arrived home at the end of his very long work week to find a large envelope in his mailbox, and he'd known without looking that it was from Tony.

He had quietly taken it inside, all the way into his bedroom, and locked the door before peeling the gum open and emptying it onto the bed. And there they were, the things that Tony had held precious for so long, packed up with a little note that was some combination of acceptance and plea.

Tony didn't know what he wanted, but he was trying his best to make Loki happy, even when he wasn't sure how to do that. Loki knew on some level that it was a manipulative gesture, but he was also sure that Tony didn't know it.

Sitting on his bed, looking at the objects of long dead lovers who had been holding sway over Tony, Loki finally understood some important things.

First was that for all his dramatic escape and long weekend moping, he had never once tried to imagine going forward without Tony. He'd imagined what would happen if he'd turned Tony in, or gotten Tony mental help, or just asked that they both try to forget about it. But he hadn't imagined walking away and never seeing Tony again.

Second was that he wasn't afraid of ending up like Tony's other lovers. Shouldn't he have been? Despite what Tony had said, there was the possibility that he would kill Loki. He had killed other people he thought he loved, why not Loki too? Strangely, the thought didn't frighten him as much as the thought of cutting Tony out of his life. He had known that he was in love with Tony, but the point was driven home.

Third was that outside the grove, which was unlikely to ever be discovered, Loki held in his hands some of the only items that could prove Tony was connected to the people he had killed at the time of their deaths. In and of themselves they weren't proof, sure, but combined with Loki's testimony, he suspected they were enough to get the police to take a long look at Tony.

Three hours later, he found himself pulled over on the shoulder of the Pacific Coast Highway, looking down a cliff into the inky-black water. To anyone passing, he probably looked like he was contemplating throwing himself off the edge. In a way, he supposed, he was doing just that.

Except that he wasn't contemplating. He had already made his decision. He finished tying the last piece of twine he'd brought, connecting the lovely golden heart locket to a rock he'd picked up by the edge of the road. It was the last one. He paused more on the enormity of what he'd done than any sense of hesitance.

And then he hurled the locket into the ocean.

He didn't look back as he got into his car and started driving toward Tony's ranch house. He would be back at work on Monday, or he would be dead. Either way, no one would think Tony had anything to do with it. He'd left a note in his kitchen saying he was driving up to visit his father and addressed it to Tony, as though he was expecting him to drop by for some reason. It was mundane and boring, but he was sure that if the worst did happen, it would eventually find its way into Tony's hands, and he would see what Loki had meant.

*Haven't decided which road to take yet, but either way, I'm sure I'll get home. I'll see you soon. I love you, always.*

He saw lights flip on as he came up the incredibly long drive of the sprawling ranch house. Tony must have had some kind of alarm system to tell him someone was coming. It occurred to Loki that he should have called. It was almost midnight, and... what had he done with his phone, anyway? And he'd forgotten their usual goodnight texts, damn. He hoped Tony was okay.

As he put his car in park and hit the power button, the front door flew open. Tony was silhouetted there in the door, the hall lights bright behind him. Loki was surprised, but he felt absolutely no fear. He knew that he was putting himself in danger, more danger than Tony was going to be comfortable with, but he was comfortable with the decision he had made.

He grabbed the overnight bag he'd packed from the passenger seat, and found his phone underneath it. Three missed texts, all from Tony. Poor thing.

He tucked his phone into his pocket without reading them just yet, and headed up to the door.

"Are you okay?" Tony asked, his voice pleading.

Loki smiled at him. "I'm okay, Tony. I'm sorry I didn't get your texts, I was driving."

Tony just watched him for a long moment. "You came. I didn't think you were going to do that."

"Ever?" Loki reached out and put a hand on his shoulder. The skin there was oddly rough. He pulled Tony into the bright light of the entranceway, and couldn't contain his shock. He was

wearing nothing but boxer shorts, and the skin on his shoulders and chest was pink, peeling as though he'd gotten a particularly bad sunburn. It crept all the way up his neck, and even his back. What had he done?

He also had deep circles under his eyes, and he looked like he'd lost weight.

All in a week.

Tony nodded, and he looked like a puppy who was expecting master to kick him. How was it possible that Loki felt like the villain?

He pulled Tony in, wrapping his arms around him so tight they could barely breathe. "I love you, Tony. Nothing changes that. I realized it this afternoon. I thought about a lot of things, but I never once thought about not coming back."

"You're gonna stay?" Tony asked hesitantly, obviously not wanting to push, but very much wanting to push.

"There's something we need to do before that's decided," Loki said, wanting to get the qualifier in before getting Tony's hopes up. "But unless the situation is out of my control, yes, I'm going to stay."

Tony pulled him back in and held him. If the shoulder of his t-shirt was suddenly damp, well, he wasn't going to tell anyone. Not moving Tony's face from his shoulder, Loki put an arm around him and led him to the bedroom to put his bag down.

"If something goes wrong, Tony, I want you to abandon my car somewhere between San Francisco and Portland without anyone seeing you. Can you do that for me?" He tried to go as slowly as possible, as gently as he could, but he knew it was going to be a shock. Tony was going to resist.

Tony pulled his head up to look at him. "You want me to do what?"

"My car," he reiterated. "I want you to leave it where people will believe I was traveling to visit my father."

"Are you making arrangements in case I kill you?" Tony's eyes were glassy and round, and Loki couldn't help but feel like the villainous master who had indeed kicked the puppy. And intended to kick him some more.

"Not quite," he said, shaking his head. "I'm making arrangements this one time." He paused, trying to gather the words in a way that didn't sound unhinged. It didn't work.

"I don't want you to do that," Tony insisted. "You came back, you're not leaving me. I don't want to hurt you. I won't!"

He sat Tony down on the bed and then straddled his lap. "I love you, Tony. I believe that you don't want to hurt me. I want to be with you more than anything. *Anything*. But I need to feel safe. I know you understand that."

"Of course, Loki. But I don't know how—"

"It's okay. I do." Loki peeled his shirt off and tossed it onto his bag.

He reached for his fly, and Tony's hands stopped him. "What are you doing?"

Loki put on a big false grin. “What does it look like I’m doing?”

Tony shook his head and pulled at Loki’s hands. “I don’t think we’re ready for that. I told you—you know what I did, when I did it. You can’t want that.”

“Actually,” he said softly, “that’s exactly what I want.”

Tony’s head snapped up and their eyes caught; Tony’s full of confusion and displeasure, and Loki’s utterly determined.

“I need this, Tony. I need to know.” There was a pleading note in his voice that would normally have irritated him, but he thought it somehow appropriate, under the circumstances.

“It won’t work,” Tony hedged. “You said you’re not leaving. You haven’t given me any reason to—to want to—I don’t want to, Loki. *Please*.” The desperation in Tony’s voice almost gave him pause.

“This is what I need, Tony. If you can’t make me feel safe, I can’t be here.” He artfully implied that he would leave without saying it outright. He wasn’t sure what he’d do if Tony wouldn’t give him what he needed. He had to make sure, for both of them. He didn’t want to live with a concern for his life, or have Tony constantly worrying about Loki leaving or dead.

There was only one way he could be sure, he had decided. He stood, stripped out of his jeans and boxer briefs, and tossed them down onto his shirt. A convenient package for Tony to clean up, if the worst happened.

He turned back to Tony and, placing a hand on his chest, shoved him back on the bed and stripped his boxers off. Little Tony was already showing some interest, which was curious, since Tony himself seemed close to tears. Loki motioned for Tony to move back, and he did. The full extent of the burn was visible, but it didn’t have clearly delineated edges like a sunburn. It was focused on his chest and shoulders, and ran a long way down his belly and sides, but slowly faded when it reached his groin and hips—still burned, but not as badly.

He had to ask, if only for curiosity’s sake. “Where did you get the burn, Tony?”

“Burn?” Tony asked absently, staring at Loki as though he was a fabulous piece of art.

“The burn,” Loki said again. “Your skin is peeling.”

“Is it?” Tony finally looked down at himself, and made a face of disgust. “Oh. I uh, I don’t—fuck, you can’t want this.” He started to roll away, but Loki climbed up to straddle his hips again.

“You have to do this for me, Tony,” he whispered softly, running the fingers of his left hand down Tony’s chest and brushing against his cock. “It’s what I need. I know what you need. Don’t I always?”

Loki, puppy kicker. Whiskey-gold eyes looked up at him, filled with tears and lust. Now that was a combination Loki never in his life thought he’d see.

“You—you do, Loki. But I don’t want—”

“I know what you want. And you can have what you want when you give me what I need.” Loki ran his right hand down to Tony’s neck, and for just a moment, he saw hope in those beautiful eyes. He was so open, so transparent. He was thinking that maybe, just maybe this was what Loki wanted: to hurt him.

He took his hand from Tony's neck, and reached for the lube. It struck him as a little funny, but he determinedly didn't laugh. He was going out of his way to make sure he wasn't in pain when he died. They had largely stopped using condoms, given the combination of monogamy and clean STI tests, but considering the circumstances, it seemed for the best. It took him a moment to find one.

Poor Tony was struggling as Loki rolled the condom onto him, and it made him feel more than a little like a rapist. "Tony?"

"Yes?" Came the broken whisper of a response.

He made eye contact and kept it, trying to keep Tony's mind off what he was doing. "Do you want me?"

That, finally, got a half smile. "Always, Loki. I just don't want to—"

"That's not on the table," Loki cut him off. "You give me this, or..." He let the sentence trail off, a last ditch attempt to give Tony the impetus he needed, but not lie.

Almost hesitantly, Tony rolled them over so that he was on top. He pressed slowly inside, and gods, how Loki had missed that feeling. He didn't even try to hold back his enthusiastic moan. Tony echoed the sound, and in less than a second, he went from hesitant and terrified to thrusting with reckless abandon. It burned for a moment despite the lube, but it didn't bother Loki. It was perfect. Tony was perfect.

It was too bad that Loki had to ruin the moment by reaching up to grab one of Tony's hands and pull it down to his neck. Tony faltered for a moment, and gave Loki a pleading look. Loki did the only thing he could think of to force the issue. He started to push Tony away from him.

It was a relief when Tony's other hand came down to meet the first around his throat. Dying with Tony's hands around his throat was better than pushing him away.

The pressure built in his lungs, but after a few seconds there was a strange shift. It felt like he was an empty balloon that needed filled, but his body drifted away. Everything was focused on his head and neck. The blood rushing in his ears was the loudest thing he'd ever heard. He could feel the insides of his throat rubbing together, and it was awful and painful. His body wanted to cough or gasp, and it wasn't sure which.

Through it all, the only thing he could see was Tony's eyes, soft and sad. The last thing he felt was Tony's love, a tangible thing that he swore he could touch. He wanted to show it to him, to tell him that this was the most important thing in his world, but all he could do was try to gasp for breath.

He wasn't sure if his eyes closed, or if the world just went black around him.

## The Rest of His Life

When Loki's eyes slipped shut, Tony jerked his hands back. Oh no. He hadn't meant to do it. He didn't want to hurt Loki at all. Loki was the one person in the world he never wanted to see in pain. And the look on his face...

Oh god oh god oh god oh god.

He did it. He killed Loki. He killed him.

He had struggled against Tony, tried to leave, but it didn't matter. He had the right to leave Tony if he wanted to, if it was what made him happy. But of course, Tony was a monster, so he hadn't allowed it.

That was when he realized how quickly he had come back to himself. In the past, he had always realized what was going on later, so much later. He had found himself stroking cold dead cheeks, staring into empty eyes. Loki's eyes were closed, his skin still warm.

Hell, Tony was still... erm, well, yes. He started to pull out, then realized that it had just happened. Just then.

What if there was still time? His hands flew to Loki's chest, to start compressions, to try...

A heartbeat. He felt a heartbeat. Loki wasn't dead.

Loki wasn't dead!

He wanted to stand up and dance, but it occurred to him that he had more important things to do. He pressed a hand up toward Loki's face, and sure enough, there was a shuddering breath still emanating from his nose.

He hadn't killed Loki at all. He'd stopped himself.

It was true. He loved Loki, like he'd never loved the others. No part of him wanted to hurt Loki, not even to force him to stay.

"Loki?" he whispered. "Loki, please wake up."

He hesitated to shake him, to force him awake—hadn't he done enough damage? He had a nearly overwhelming urge to keep touching Loki, to assure himself that he was still alive, still breathing, still there. At the same time, he thought that perhaps he didn't have that right anymore. He had hurt Loki. He may have stopped himself, saved Loki from the worst of himself, but he *had* hurt him. Nothing could ever change that, regardless of whether he ever did it again.

Was Loki ever going to be able to forgive him?

Would Loki even still love him, after what he'd done?

Loki had said that he needed to be able to feel safe around Tony, and it had made perfect sense. What he asked had been horrible, but he had obviously spent a lot of time thinking about it. He had understood what he'd asked for, even to the point of preparing for the worst. Gods, he'd even told

Tony how to get away with his murder, if it had happened.

He was so much better than Tony deserved.

Tony wanted Loki to feel safe with him, wanted Loki to be completely happy. There was no longer any way for that to be possible. Loki knew what Tony was capable of. He'd seen it, had felt it, firsthand.

It was somehow appropriate. Right when Tony realized that he would never be able to kill Loki, and was as cured as he could ever be of what he was, he was probably going to lose Loki.

Dream Pepper would be pleased, he thought.

Maybe when Loki left him, he would give her what she wanted. He had rope in the old barn. He could just join Pepper and the others in the grove, stay forever. Maybe that was what he deserved. Maybe it was better than he deserved.

Loki gave a small sound, like a wheezy cough, and Tony's attention was immediately back on him. He had never been happier in his life than when those gorgeous green eyes opened, and they looked at sharp as ever. They flicked around the room and stopped on Tony hovering over him. They were focused, but they didn't fill with terror. More like... confusion?

That wasn't good.

"Loki?" He stopped and bit his lip, not exactly sure of what to say. He shifted away a bit, bringing both of their attention to the no-longer-a-large-problem between them. He actually felt himself blushing at that. He pulled away and sat up on his haunches, removing the condom, tying it off, and tossing it into the trash can. When he tried talking again, his voice was so soft he could barely hear it. "Does it hurt, Loki? Do you need a doctor?"

Loki seemed to think about that for a moment, and lifted his hand to his head, then lowered it to his throat. His eyes had wandered, but they flipped back up to Tony, the look of confusion back.

"I'm so sorry, Loki. I didn't mean to, it just—it just happened. And I didn't want to—" he found that he could no longer suck in enough air to continue speaking. He just breathed for a moment, and was pretty sure that he did it poorly. All he could hear was his own gasping, and he felt a sudden rush of wetness flooding his cheeks. He wanted to beg Loki not to leave. He wanted to throw up. He wanted to run away. He wanted Loki to take him in his arms and never let go.

Tony was used to never getting what he wanted, so he wasn't going to make any demands. Not even if his breathing calmed down and allowed him to speak again. It didn't seem that was going to be a problem, though. It seemed to be getting worse. He was starting to feel light headed, and he watched more than felt himself fall forward until he could support himself with a hand on the bed.

Loki moved under him, taking his face in both hands, and Tony could see his lips moving, but he didn't hear words coming out. Had he destroyed Loki's beautiful voice? The human hyoid bone was a delicate thing, and if Tony had broken it...

"—ony," Loki's voice broke through his own shallow gasps. "Listen to me. You're breathing too fast, you have to slow down." Loki reached out and covered Tony's mouth with his hand, as though to stop him breathing. Oddly enough, the action alone helped. Then Loki leaned in and put the other hand in his hair. "Now take a breath and count with me."

\*

Laufey didn't approve. He was also ten feet tall and blue, but the important part seemed to be the fact that he didn't approve.

He was giving Loki a glare that was quite out of character. Loki hadn't ever realized how much he appreciated his father's laid back views on life. He'd been expecting Laufey to be unhappy about his dating the owner of Stark Industries, but he hadn't been expecting anger.

"I should have killed you myself when you were born," Laufey informed him imperiously.

Loki was so confused that he couldn't form an answer.

Laufey paused for a moment and then shook his head in disappointment. "I never wanted a runt like you. It's no great surprise that no one else does either."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Loki finally found his tongue.

"The fact that the only way a man would want you is dead," his father said.

But that wasn't right, was it? Loki hadn't ever had a problem finding a man who wanted him. It was just his luck that the first one he wanted to keep was the one who killed him.

But that wasn't right, either. Tony's soulful brown eyes materialized in front of him, followed by the rest of his body. He was covered in armor, and Loki couldn't stand it. He needed to know. He needed to see Tony's heart, to know that it was his.

Lunging forward, he started tearing piece after piece of metal off of Tony. Neither man nor armor offered resistance, but when he tore off the last piece, all he found was a glowing blue light.

He woke, which seemed strange.

Acting on last available information, he gasped for air, making him give a little cough. His whole body was crawling with the strangest feeling, like fingers tapping everywhere. Blood rushing to oxygen-starved cells, he told himself. His blood was running. His lungs were breathing in and out—normally, even, once the coughing stopped.

He was alive. Tony didn't kill him.

It was very strange. He had expected pain. It certainly hadn't been a comfortable experience, but without the active pressure on his throat, it didn't hurt at all. There was an awareness, like when he had pulled a long day shift and spent too many hours talking, but there was no actual pain.

"Loki?" Tony whispered, looking more like the kicked puppy than ever. He pulled back, and Loki was immediately reminded of what they'd been up to when he'd passed out. Tony sat back and ridded himself of the condom before talking again. "Does it hurt, Loki? Do you need a doctor?"

He considered. He *had* lost consciousness, he didn't know for how long. Given the fact that it looked like both of them were still prepared to continue what they had started, it couldn't have been long. Loki was quite certain that Tony didn't get off on hurting people, so his cock wasn't



acting on that. But that meant that Tony had not only not killed him, but had pulled back—*must* have pulled back just after Loki had blacked out.

Tony started talking again, his tone terrified and his words rambling. “I’m so sorry, Loki. I didn’t mean to, it just—it just happened. And I didn’t want to—” His breathing sped, and tears started to fall down his cheeks—not in some movie-perfect single man-tear kind of way, but as though a waterfall had been switched on in his eyes.

After a few seconds, the breathing turned into gasping, and Loki realized that he was hyperventilating. And it wasn’t getting better. When Tony started to look dizzy and fell forward, Loki reached up to him.

“Tony, love. Tony, listen to me. You’re breathing too fast, you have to slow down.” That just earned him an uncomprehending look, and then a strange sort of dawning horror that made no sense.

Having dealt with hyperventilation once or twice (or a few hundred times), he sighed, and leaned in to cup a hand over Tony’s mouth to recycle his carbon dioxide and slow his breathing.

Tony seemed to come back to himself, and his breathing smoothed out over the next few moments. It gave Loki some time to consider the situation. He had done everything he could think of to get Tony to hurt him: asked, demanded, even deliberately provoked. And Tony had tried to give it to him.

But Loki was alive.

Tony was still crying, the poor dear.

But Loki had literally never felt more alive in his life. He wasn’t converted to the notion of erotic asphyxiation or anything; that would always be too full of an unfortunate symbolic meaning for them, and it didn’t feel like it could be sexy. But being alive... well, being alive was definitely sexy.

He reached his hands up to wipe away Tony’s tears. “Stop, Love. There’s nothing to cry about.” It seemed odd to him that his voice wasn’t even hoarse.

“Lo—Loki?” Tony asked through his tears. “Love?”

Loki grinned and shoved Tony down onto his back on the bed. “Love,” he said again. “My. Love.”

He kissed every inch of Tony’s face, and found himself smiling. He had done it. He’s decided that he had to know if Tony would kill him. And he knew.

That was when he felt the fundamental shift in their relationship. He had been letting Tony lead, all those months. Tony was magnetic, charismatic, and intelligent; he was everything the stereotypical alpha male was supposed to be. Behind all that machismo, though, Tony wasn’t an alpha male at all.

Loki had always felt trapped inside himself as a younger man. He was tall, sure, but traditional masculine words weren’t the ones people used to describe him. Loki wasn’t strong, and handsome, and possessing of enormous biceps. Loki was slim, and elegant, and rather unfortunately, bordering on pretty. So people always neatly tucked Loki into the “effeminate” box, and then forgot about it. All of the men he’d ever dated had taken one look at him and designated him bottom. Until Tony.

*Sex is just a way to get even closer to you*, he had told Loki that first time.

It wasn't that Loki minded being on bottom, it was just that everyone always seemed to equate bottom with submissive, and while Loki was more than willing to be the one, he would never in his life be the other. Tony didn't care much about top or bottom either, but he'd been forced into domination all his life, the same way Loki had been pressed to submit. He just hadn't known what the problem was, why things always ended up wrong.

Tony had been unknowingly trying to show him all that time. He initiated conversation when they met, but let Loki lead. Loki had assumed that it was a natural way for a patient to act. He had shown an interest in sex, but let Loki decide when it was going to happen. Loki had believed he was just being too gentlemanly to push. When Loki had discovered him in the grove, he had given over to Loki's lead entirely. When Loki had demanded he try to kill him, he had, despite his obvious horror.

Without either of them realizing it, Tony had given him all of the power in the relationship. Loki had simply failed to take it, because he had no idea that it was being given to him. No wonder they hadn't known what to do when something had gone wrong. Tony couldn't take charge, and Loki didn't know that he was supposed to.

The evening had started with him realizing he wasn't going to live without Tony. He had come to the conclusion that he could trust Tony with his life, despite all indications otherwise. It was time for him to bring Tony to the realizations that he had found.

\*

Loki was smiling and kissing him. It felt real, but it didn't feel like it *could be* real.

You don't just throttle someone half to death, and then have them wake up and kiss you.

And yet, the proof was kissing his way down Tony's neck, nibbling softly at the sensitive spot where it met his shoulder. Tony had no idea how to react, until the nibble became a downright bite, and he let out an involuntary moan.

He really needed more information. "Loki?"

"Mmm?" Loki didn't move his mouth, just made a noise of inquiry. The light pressure on Tony's neck told him that he was being marked, like a favorite possession. He shivered, and the mouth did pull away for a moment. "Are you cold, Tony?"

"No. I'm—" he broke off in an unfortunate snuffle.

He was pretty sure that his masculinity wasn't going to survive the night. It was in its death throes, and Loki was busy gathering up Tony's hands and pressing them into the bed above their heads. That was new. Loki hadn't ever—the pressure on his neck was back, a little lower. He wondered just how much of a mark Loki intended to leave.

While it had wilted considerably in the intervening moments, Tony found his cock responding with vigor to Loki's strangely affectionate reaction to attempted murder. When Loki ground their hips

together, he found that he was way behind in the race to being ready.

“Loki, this can’t be what you want.” He leaned his head to the side to try to make eye contact. Was Loki avoiding looking at him? Was he going to try to pretend it had never happened?

Loki’s head came up sharply, and he hand pressed Tony’s wrists deeper into the mattress. “Are you telling me what I want, Tony? I should think I know that better than you do.”

The constraining pressure on his wrists made something that felt suspiciously like lust flutter in his stomach. “I almost killed you,” he protested, trying to distract himself.

To his astonishment, Loki laughed. “No, you didn’t.” Tony opened his mouth to protest, but Loki put the index finger of his free hand up to stop him. “I can’t have been unconscious more than a moment. My throat doesn’t even hurt. That was probably only a little more intense than what some couples call an exciting evening.”

Tony felt his brows draw together, but he didn’t protest again. Was it true? Loki seemed to believe it completely. And his voice wasn’t rough. He didn’t seem to be having any trouble drawing breath. Tony didn’t see any bruises marring the perfect skin of his throat.

“Tony, you didn’t want to kill me. So you didn’t.” Loki leaned back down until their lips were almost pressed together. “Now be quiet and spread your legs.”

Spread his... oh. Well that was very different. His eyes unconsciously sought the bottle of lube, but he immediately trained them back on Loki, keeping his mouth shut. If that was what Loki wanted, then he would have it.

Seeming to read his mind, Loki rolled his eyes. “Stop that right now.” He grabbed the bottle without letting Tony’s wrists free. “This isn’t a punishment. If you want to say no, I insist that you say no, right this minute.”

Tony paused for a moment. He didn’t even have to think about it to know that he wasn’t going to say no to Loki. It wasn’t out of guilt, though. He loved Loki. He trusted him. He wanted him, always, in every way.

Loki put the lube bottle down next to them and lifted his hand to cover Tony’s neck, applying a bit of pressure. “And now? Do you want me to stop now?”

For a moment, Tony gave in to the idea that he didn’t deserve to say no. But lying to Loki was hard. “Yes,” he whispered, and immediately the pressure ceased.

“Did that surprise you?” Loki asked.

“That you didn’t kill me? Of course not.” Tony was sure he was missing something. Unless... “Are you saying you should be on top from now on? So I won’t have the chance to—”

Loki groaned. “For a genius, Tony Stark, you are an idiot. That’s exactly opposite the point I was making. You said stop, I stopped. I never said stop. I said go, go all the way, and you couldn’t do it. Do you think that makes me trust you less?”

Acting like that answered all questions, he grabbed the lube bottle. As though by magic, he managed to open it, get some out, and close it back up again without making a mess. All with only one hand, since the other was still holding Tony’s wrists. Then without preamble, Loki shoved his knees apart and reached down to press a finger into him.

Tony promptly failed to hold in a tiny whimper.

Loki looked pleased, and gave him a wide, predatory smile. "Do you like that, Love? Do you like me holding you down and having my way with you?"

Gods help him, he did. He nodded, but Loki raised an eyebrow and paused in his ministrations. Tony immediately understood the implicit order. "Yes Loki. I like you holding me down and having your way with me."

The words tasted strange, so unlike anything he'd ever said before. He'd always thought himself a generous, caring lover, but his upbringing had never allowed him to consider letting someone else take charge. Loki slipped another finger into him when he said it, though, and it felt like a reward for—for what?

"That's a good boy," Loki whispered in his ear. "Always so good for me, Tony. Always do exactly what I say, even when you don't want to."

It was as though a light bulb clicked on in his brain. Loki thought that... because... but he wasn't! Was he? The light bulb shorted out with a crackling hiss and a puff of smoke. He was swiftly distracted from it by the upward press of Loki's fingers, and then all the lights in his head were flickering in a symphony of oh-gods-yes-right-there.

"No wandering off into your own brain, Love. You need to be here with me. All you need to do is listen to me, and do as I say." Loki's smooth, hypnotic voice washed over him, and his whole body just *relaxed*. Yes. That was all he needed.

Loki was alive, and he was fine, and he knew how to make everything right. All Tony had to do was trust Loki, do what Loki told him to. Everything always turned out right when he did what Loki wanted.

Nothing had ever felt so *right* in his life as when Loki pushed into him. It had always been awkward and uncomfortable before, on those odd occasions with Eric or Whit. They expected him to be on bottom and direct them at the same time.

There was none of that artifice with Loki. Tony had never been in charge with him, top or bottom. He just hadn't realized it until the moment when Loki leaned down and whispered to him that he was a good boy.

He felt himself smile up at Loki like some kind of adoring nitwit. "I love you, Loki."

Loki smiled back, and paused his thrusts for a moment to lean down and kiss Tony lightly. "I love you too, Tony."

"Forever?" Sure, it was needy, but Tony had discovered a few things about himself already that night. Being a needy bottom wasn't such a shock.

Loki chuckled at him. "Always, Tony."

A few hours later, Tony was curled up against Loki's chest, breathing deep and even. It seemed that he hadn't slept well in the intervening week, and he needed to catch up. Loki *had* worked him rather hard, he supposed.

When pressed about what he'd done during the week, Tony had been vague at best.

On Loki's text-messaged orders, he'd eaten all of the stew over the weekend. After that he hadn't felt like cooking, and peanut butter had made him feel sick, so he'd subsisted on carrot sticks until they ran out. When they were gone, he wasn't sure what he had eaten. Nothing, maybe?

He also wasn't really sure about where the burns had come from, but he'd been itchy since right after Loki had left. Maybe it was just stress-related eczema, or something like that. What had he done right after Loki left? Showered, mostly. All afternoon. In scalding hot water. He just hadn't been able to get clean. It was okay now, he told Loki, while covered in sweat, and lube, other bodily fluids. Or fluid, singular, as the case might be.

The whole conversation left Loki with no doubts about his hypothesis. Tony wanted direction, and his need for it was exacerbated by stressful situations. When he was at his worst, he needed Loki to tell him to do even simple things. Eat. Sleep at night. Don't hurt yourself. Don't exercise yourself to exhaustion every day when you're not eating anything but carrots.

Stop judging everything you do now based on the past.

It wasn't as simple as telling Tony to get over it, of course. That was like telling a depressed person they should try being more upbeat and expecting them not to slap you. It was going to take years of work, and since Tony wouldn't—couldn't, really—see a therapist, they were going to have to do it together.

The idea of spending the rest of his life doing one thing had always terrified Loki. It was why he'd never bought a house or looked for a serious relationship. He had always enjoyed freedom, even the illusion of freedom from a life where he had to get up and go to work four days a week.

For the first time, he was looking forward to commitment. Spending the rest of his life with Tony had seemed so far away just the night before, and that fact had been painful.

Lying there with Tony in his arms, looking at a long hard fight against guilt, depression, and abandonment issues?

He grinned and pressed himself up against Tony's back, nibbling a bit on the huge mark he'd left there earlier. Tony mumbled a vague sleepy complaint, but leaned into him.

The rest of his life was looking pretty good.

**After a particularly bad breakup, Tony finds himself in the hospital. Loki is a nurse in the ward he's sent to, and there's an immediate attraction that's hard to ignore, despite Loki's ethical concerns.**

**They bond over his treatment, and decide to try for more when Tony gets out.**

**It seems like the ideal ingredient mix for a romcom, but one of them has a secret that threatens to tear both their worlds apart.**